

ASSESSING NEW URBANISM IN CENTRAL TEXAS

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## ASSESSING NEW URBANISM IN CENTRAL TEXAS

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **ASSESSING NEW URBANISM IN CENTRAL TEXAS**

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While the conventional housing market favors large lot subdivisions and ranchettes, housing choices in Central Texas are becoming more diverse with the popularity of neotraditional techniques being imported to the region. This research examines the relationship between the ideals of the neotraditional movement, particularly smaller lots, pedestrian-friendly streets, mixing of uses, and the “neotraditional” built environment in Central Texas. Are the neotraditional developments true to their paradigm, or has the design of the neighborhoods been significantly altered? What are the causes and ramifications of the modifications? This research employs a systematic evaluation of the neighborhoods and a subsequent comparison to established

neotraditional standards, elucidating a more grounded and nuanced understanding of how New Urbanism is applied in Central Texas. This will ultimately help enable a more thorough evaluation of the merits of the neotraditional movement.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **The Modern American City and New Urbanism**

Neighborhoods are where we live, shop, work, and they shape our experiences, fundamentally providing a backdrop for our everyday lives. In fact, the nature of the built urban environment at the neighborhood scale influences our interactions with other people, how we transport ourselves and our goods, and how we personally assess our overall quality of life. A number of attempts have been made, from both the private and public sector, to improve the built environment and hence the lives of the people who live there, from the City Beautiful movement in the late nineteenth century, to Burnham's plan for Chicago in 1909, to the creation of the Department of Housing and Urban Development in the 1960s (Kaiser and Godschalk 1995).

As the twentieth century began, cities and towns were largely walking cities that were compact, diverse, centrally dominant areas with a variety of socioeconomic groups and land uses in a small geographic area (Jacobs 1961). Then the automobile arrived, the city sprawled, and land uses and income groups were separated. In the last few years, however, neighborhood design has begun to come full circle. A recent popular trend, neotraditional design, also known as New Urbanism, promotes the use of traditional methods of neighborhood design in new developments in order to improve residents'

quality of life (Falconer Al-Hindi 2001; Katz 1994). Proponents believe that New Urbanism can alleviate sprawl, placelessness, and lack of housing diversity by reimplementing methods of design that historically created desirable urban landscapes, such as relatively higher densities, human-scaled environments, and prominent civic buildings (Leccese and McCormick 2001).

To what degree have the principles of New Urbanism been applied in the local built environment? The purpose of this study is to examine how New Urbanism is adopted as a building paradigm in central Texas and to what extent local examples in Kyle, San Marcos, and New Braunfels adhere to the basic tenets of neotraditionalism as prescribed by its proponents. A greater understanding of place-specific market desires is critical in understanding the future of widespread applicability of New Urbanism across the landscape.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Background: The Modern American City and Sprawl**

The pattern of suburban growth common throughout the United States during the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when the towns in the study area saw their most substantial growth, led to the edge of the city becoming its most desirable part (Stilgoe 1988). In a relatively short time, urban areas in America changed from compact industrial cities to sprawling suburbs and exurbs (Garreau 1991).

Several historical processes were responsible for this. The automobile became the primary mode of transportation, and the price of gasoline was low, giving individuals the ability to commute longer distances, and the government subsidized single-family housing through FHA loans and tax deductions. Homebuilders also sought attractive lands at low prices and often found this near the urban fringe. These factors enabled a residential exodus from the inner cities to surrounding areas.

A number of modernist tools and techniques facilitated and shaped urban growth during this period. Construction techniques such as mass-produced housing caught on, and suburbs on the edges of cities sprang up seemingly overnight (Jackson 1985). Additionally, Euclidian zoning, meant to separate, sometimes incompatible, uses within the urban area, became a widespread and powerful tool of municipalities, and large swaths of land were designated for a single use such as residential or commercial

(Falconer-Al Hindi 2001). The inability of the pre-industrial city to accommodate the automobile led to wider streets, more highways, and an abundance of parking lots (Dear 2000).

Not only was the landscape modernist, but so too were the mechanisms created to manage it. Town planning was carried out by trained “experts” (Filion 1996; Fishman 1977). By the middle of the twentieth century, planners generated comprehensive plans meant to guide land use (Kaiser and Godschalk 1995).

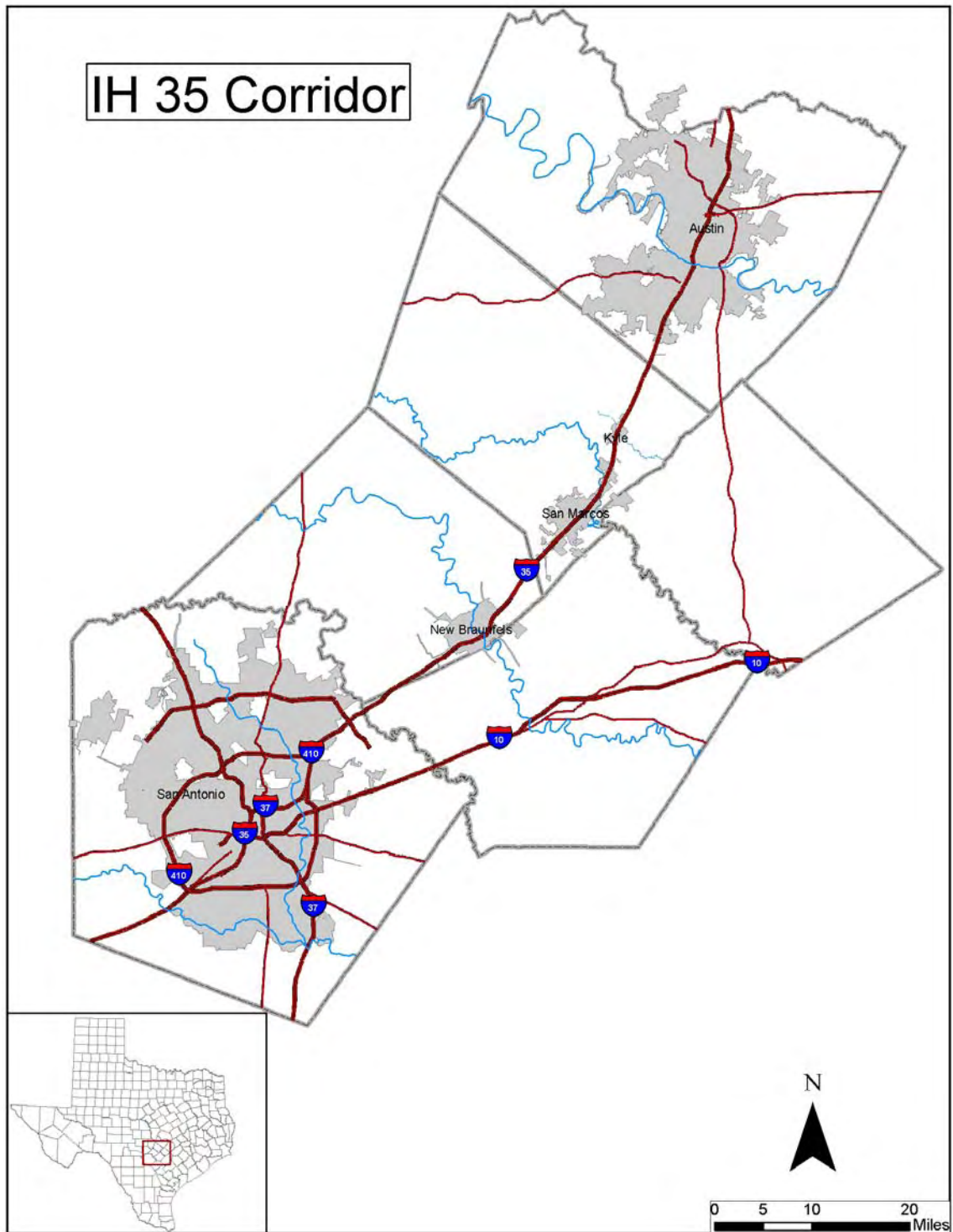
All of these elements combined to create the American urban landscape as we know it today, consisting of large homogenous residential subdivisions and commercial strip centers (Jackson 1985). This pattern of development has resulted in multiple problems, a few of which include loss of public places, automobile dependence, and an overall decline in sense of community (Frug 1996; Jacobs 1961; Kunstler 1993). Such has been the dominant pattern of growth as the population boomed in central Texas.

Cities across Texas have exhibited this pattern of growth. The state eagerly adopted the automobile culture and in much of this study area, the landscape quickly changed from rural to urban. This transition was interesting because the rural lifestyle continued to permeate the local, urbanizing environment through large lot sizes, large home sizes, and quite a random pattern to urban expansion.

### **Study Areas: Kyle, San Marcos, and New Braunfels**

Central Texas is a transition zone, a meeting of different physical attributes such as climate, topography, and vegetation type, along with human features such as ethnicity, economic base, and historical regional ties. Along the Balcones Escarpment, verdant coastal land begins to give way to desert, plains rise and form hills, and the South meets

the West. Robert Utley, a renowned local author, calls this area the end of the cotton belt and the beginning of the Great American West (Smith 1992). This section will give a brief history of the area, focusing on the three towns that will be the study areas: Kyle, San Marcos, and New Braunfels (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Location of Study Area.** Map by the author (Texas Natural Resources Information System 2008).



The Spanish first began to permanently settle in central Texas in the early eighteenth century, and San Marcos was one of the first areas settled because of its clean springs and river. After Mexico won its independence from Spain, the Mexican government continued to colonize the area (Stovall 1986). Mexican rule was short, and following the Texas Revolution in the mid nineteenth century, a wave of German immigrants made their way to Texas (Jordan 1966). New Braunfels was first populated during this period, almost solely by Germans. San Marcos, in contrast, gained a large portion of its population from the southern United States during this time (Dykes-Hoffman 2003).

The Civil War and Reconstruction stunted the growth of the area, but in the 1880s, a new round of building began (Stovall 1986). There is evidence of this in the architecture of the area at present, with the appearance of Victorian and Gothic Revival houses from this time. The city of Kyle was founded in 1880, and largely because of the new railroad line within two years had grown to almost 500 residents. The town would not see another period of such rapid growth for a hundred years (Strom 1981). In contrast, by the turn of the century, the population of San Marcos had reached 3,000 (Stovall 1986).

The Depression slowed economic and population growth throughout the area. In the 1950s, a drought significantly affected the San Marcos River, and as the population continued to increase, groundwater management became a major issue in central Texas (Fisher 1992). In the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, a boom of growth in San Antonio and Austin led to rapid population growth throughout the region. (Thorpe 2000). All three towns have experienced this growth, but the change is

most striking in Kyle, which has grown from a population of just over 2,000 in 1990 to an estimated population of over 20,000 in 2006 (see Table 1). This overwhelming growth caused Kyle to place a moratorium on development at various times (Schwartz 2002). This boom was enabled first by a state economy that was strong, largely because of high oil prices, while the rest of the nation was in recession in the 1970s. This created an atmosphere that was conducive to business and growth, and, drawn by the attractive local amenities, several high tech industries located in and around the area (Vaughan 2006).

**Table 1. Study Area Demographics.** (US Census Bureau 1990, 2000, 2006)

Town	Population 1990	Population 2000	2001 Estimate	2002 Estimate	2003 Estimate	2004 Estimate	2005 Estimate	2006 Estimate
Kyle	2225	5314	6,962	8,863	11,520	14,284	17,984	20,655
New Braunfels	27334	36494	39,735	41,152	42,820	44,953	47,137	49,969
San Marcos	28743	34733	38,954	42,419	43,779	44,779	46,146	47,181
Percent Increase from 1990								
Town		2000	1-Jul-01	1-Jul-02	1-Jul-03	1-Jul-04	1-Jul-05	1-Jul-06
Kyle		138.80%	212.90%	298.30%	417.80%	542.00%	708.30%	828.30%
New Braunfels		33.50%	45.40%	50.60%	56.70%	64.50%	72.40%	82.80%
San Marcos		20.80%	35.50%	47.60%	52.30%	55.80%	60.50%	64.10%

### Trends in Postmodernism

A number of criticisms of the modernist urban landscape have led to a movement called postmodernism. The term originated in the arts and has filtered into other fields such as architecture, geography, and the social sciences. Because of its broad multidisciplinary usage, postmodernism can be vague and difficult to define (Dear 2000; Goodchild 1990). Broadly, common themes include dissatisfaction with the mechanistic nature of modernism, liberal borrowing of ideas from a variety of premodern periods, and

eclecticism (Berg 1993; Soja 2000). Within the realm of urban design, postmodernism includes the preference for participatory planning (Filion 1996), moving away from Fordism and mass produced environments, and the celebration of diversity (Goodchild 1990).

Some of these postmodern ideas have filtered into professional planning but the processes have been slow to adapt (Grant 2006). Bold postmodern concepts such as mixing uses and incomes have become popular, but the more modest implementation strategies involving public participation have hindered the outcome (Filion 1996).

### **New Urbanism: Old Ideas Made New**

In one example of the postmodern response to the ills of the twentieth century city, a group led by architects such as Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk (DPZ), and Peter Calthorpe have proposed a return to more traditional methods of designing the neighborhood, revisiting such design features as smaller lot sizes, reduced setbacks, houses that emphasize the porch instead of the garage, and mixing of uses and socio-economic groups (Katz 1994). Streets are designed to be less dendritic with greater connectivity and a variety of transportation options, focusing on the shared use of roads between automobiles and pedestrians. This is often achieved through avoiding such features as cul-de-sacs and implementing a grid pattern of street design and emphasis on creating a pedestrian-friendly environment (Langdon 1994).

The earliest literature to examine New Urbanism explains its principles and history and evaluates its prospects for the future (Ford 1999; Furuseth 1997; Harvey 1997; Langdon 1994). Examining this literature provides background and information about New Urbanism. Neotraditional development is applied either in existing areas or

as a new development (Calthorpe 1994). Neighborhoods within existing areas can be retrofitted with New Urbanist design principles. This type of development has several advantages. It uses existing infrastructure, is already a part of a community, and can save and incorporate historical buildings. Despite these positives, the developments that have garnered the most attention are the large new projects. These are usually built in undeveloped areas, disconnected from the existing urban area. And since there is no existing retail or office space in these areas, residents often must commute just like conventional suburban residents (Ford 1999). Because the new developments are more common and better known and studied, they will be the focus of this study.

The premise that these design features can have such impacts is a topic of debate. Critics of New Urbanism believe it to be nothing more than architectural determinism, a concept that has “long been discredited” (Ford 1999, 252), or similarly assert that New Urbanism is “spatial determinism” (Harvey 1997, 3). The New Urbanists’ response to this is that neotraditional design does not create improvements such as sense of community; it merely makes them more likely (Talen 1999).

The terms New Urbanism, neotraditional planning, and traditional neighborhood design (TND) are all used, often interchangeably, to describe this particular movement. The difference between the terms is minimal, related more to their scales than their meanings. Neotraditional planning is the overall collection of concepts. New Urbanism is the application of the concepts in actual places. TND is the application of these concepts at the neighborhood scale in particular (Furuseth 1997).

In 1996 the Congress for the New Urbanism, a group of planners, architects, and others, released its charter, which lays out neotraditional design principles and gives

several broad guidelines for implementing them. It also lists numerous benefits of New Urbanism such as improved transportation and increased sense of community (Calthorpe and Fulton 2001).

### **Evaluating New Urbanism**

More recent literature has progressed from simply explaining the concepts of New Urbanism to testing its claims, for example whether or not New Urban neighborhoods show an improvement over contemporary developments in variables such as sense of community. A brief review of the literature examining this will follow, in order to show how the topic of New Urbanism is often approached.

Surveys are used to collect primary data, but when examining “sense of community,” operationalizing such an abstract concept is a challenge. Talen (1999, 1361) notes this, stating the need to “clarify the meaning of sense of community.” This need becomes clear when observing the various techniques used in the literature. Nasar and Julian (1995) use a survey with Likert scale questions designed to measure how strongly residents identify with their neighborhood. This is not the only measure used however. Brown and Cropper (2001) derive seven factors that are important in understanding sense of community from their own survey results. Taking a different approach, Kim and Kaplan (2004, 315) identify four “domains” from the literature on new urbanism and sense of community: “community or place attachment, community identity, social interaction, and pedestrianism.” A number of studies take a more qualitative approach in defining the parameters for sense of community (Ford 1999; Furuseth 1997; Talen 1999).

There is no consensus among the results of these works; the results vary and are sometimes contradictory. According to Ford (1999, 255), “providing the setting does not always lead to the expected values.” Nasar (2003) finds that a reduction in automobile use in new urbanist-type developments, but it does not lead to a greater sense of community. In contrast, Kim and Kaplan (2004) find that residents of Kentlands identify more strongly with their community and find it more satisfying. Brown and Cropper (2001) find that residents of a new urbanist suburb do enjoy a greater sense of community, but it comes with a price. Residents dislike the crowded alleys behind their homes. Similarly, Lund (2002) finds a higher sense of community in new urbanist neighborhoods but finds some unexpected correlations. For example, she finds a negative relationship between sense of community and pedestrian trips with a specific destination, such as trips to the store.

One possible explanation for the variety of results is the fact that there are several inconsistencies among the “New Urban” neighborhoods selected as study areas. Some studies use older, traditional neighborhoods as surrogates for neotraditional developments (Nasar 2003). A key premise of New Urbanism is that the mixing of various income groups is important in establishing a strong sense of community. However, many actual New Urbanist developments do not have a variety of incomes. New Urbanism is most often applied to wealthier developments, attempting to provide community only to those who can afford it (Harvey 1997). Additionally, many New Urbanist developments, including some of the most well known, such as Seaside and Laguna West, have no apartments (Furuseth 1997).

### **How “New Urban” Are These Developments?**

These inconsistencies indicate an important gap in the research. Much focus has gone to assessing sense of community of many New Urban neighborhoods while relatively little attention has been paid to how closely these developments actually follow the guidelines of neotraditional planning. In this way, I am interested in measuring the success of the execution of the neotraditional model on the Central Texas urban landscape. New Urbanism is treated as a discrete modifier; either a neighborhood is New Urbanist or it is not. In reality, “New Urban-ness” is a continuous variable. For a variety of reasons, maximization of profit by developers, citizen input, and the municipal approval process, for example, the actual built environment of “New Urbanist” neighborhoods varies from place to place (Ellis 2002; Ford 1999). Planners and developers see New Urbanism not as a complete set of ideas but rather as a “menu of choices” (Falconer-Al Hindi 2001). This research infuses the question of “place” into the New Urbanism mix and seeks to answer how the local sense of place alters the execution of New Urban principles on the landscape.

The results of studies examining the effects of New Urbanism often depend on the neighborhoods selected for examination. A specific example will make this clearer. One of the most famous examples of New Urbanism is Kentlands, in Maryland. It is the flagship for New Urbanism, containing almost all of the recommended features. Most “New Urbanist” developments have some of the design features, but rarely as many as Kentlands. It is also one of the most studied New Urban neighborhoods (Eppli and Tu 1999; Kim 2000; Lee and Ahn 2003; McCann 1995). The wider applicability of the findings of these studies to other New Urban neighborhoods comes into question because

Kentlands is more the exception than the norm. The results show the benefits or consequences of “pure” New Urbanism, as opposed to developments that do not fully apply the principles.



## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESEARCH THEMES AND METHODS**

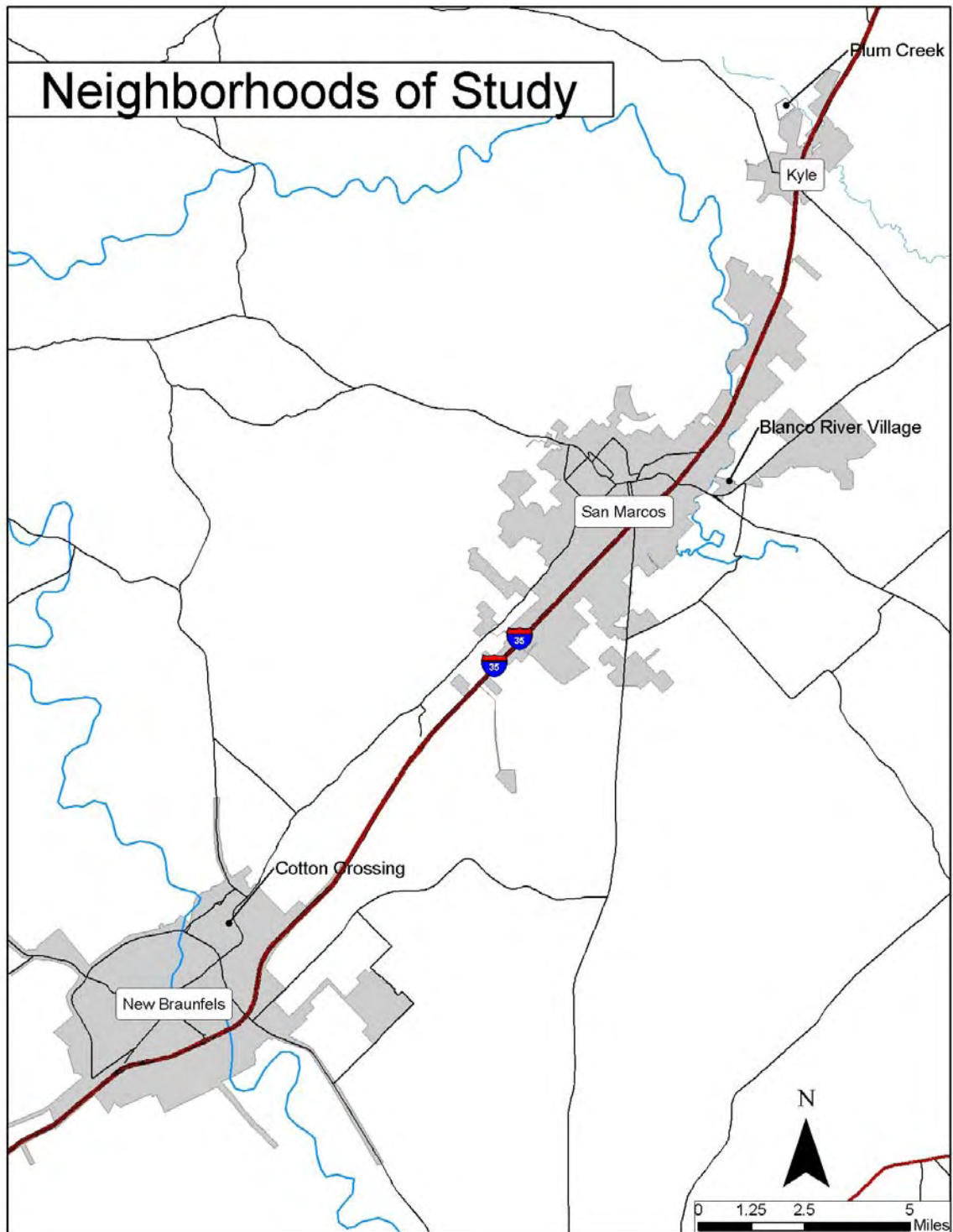
#### **Research Questions**

How is the New Urbanism applied as a building paradigm in central Texas, and how well do local examples adhere to the basic tenets of neotraditionalism? To better understand this question, this study will examine three neighborhoods, each in a different town in central Texas: Plum Creek in Kyle, Cotton Crossing in New Braunfels, and Blanco River Village in San Marcos. This study is a two-part analysis. First, it will examine how well several specific, tangible design features of each development, such as street width, mixing of uses, and sidewalks match those in the best practices guide to New Urbanism. Then it will analyze the built urban landscape to see to what degree each development promotes more abstract concepts such as “pedestrian-friendliness” that are critical design features in the neotraditional paradigm.

What does New Urbanism mean within the central Texas cultural landscape? How and why are these neighborhoods different from the basic neotraditional standards, and what does this say for the future of housing development in the San Antonio-Austin corridor? This research question alludes to the future of land use, environmental quality, and neighborhood design in the region.

**Study Areas: Plum Creek, Cotton Crossing, Blanco River Village**

Despite sharing the novelty of being neotraditional developments in close proximity in central Texas (see Figure 2), these neighborhoods are quite different from one another. Kyle's Plum Creek is large and relatively well built out. Cotton Crossing, located near Gruene in New Braunfels, is a smaller development and is less near completion. Blanco River Village, located at the edge of the city limits in San Marcos, is around the same size as Cotton Crossing but currently has only a few homes built. While the neighborhoods themselves are different, the three aligning towns are also quite different in terms of landscape aesthetic, political ideology, and housing market conditions.



**Figure 2. Neighborhoods of Study.** Map by the author (Texas Natural Resources Information System 2008).

All three are greenfield sites, undeveloped areas on the edge of town, and as the map shows each neighborhood is some distance from the center of the town. Blanco River Village is located across Interstate 35 from the city of San Marcos. Plum Creek is outside the city limits of Kyle. Cotton Crossing is over a mile from the center of New Braunfels, although it is within several hundred feet of Gruene.

### **Background on Methods**

To examine in detail the application of New Urban principles and highlight the contrasts between various New Urban developments, this study will perform a landscape analysis and appraisal. This type of analysis has deep roots in the field of geography. Carl Sauer's (1996, 309) classic *The Morphology of Landscape* proclaims the study of man-made landscapes "largely an untilled field," suggesting that cultural geographers borrow ecological techniques from other areas within the discipline. The field has since been well tilled, and the yield has been plentiful. Pierce Lewis (1979) proposes that we read the landscape in the same way as we read the written word. He acknowledges that this is a challenge, and provides guidelines for reading the landscape, suggesting that the landscape be studied in context and with an understanding of the mechanics behind it. Donald Meinig (1979) notes the relativity of the observation of landscape. Depending on the observer, the same landscape could be nature, habitat, artifact, system, a problem, wealth, ideology, history, place, or aesthetic.

Taking a more analytical approach, Conzen (1977) identifies four key themes in urban geographical landscape analysis in which a city (or its components) is viewed in terms of the system to which it belongs. Each of these themes presents a different opportunity for analysis. First, viewed as part of a functional system, a city's place in

society can be examined. Looking at the spatial system of the area allows for analysis of regional variation. Third, examining the city's place in a temporal system shows processes. This is the morphological approach that Sauer (1925) first espouses. Finally, examination of the city's physical system, its patterns of arrangement, allows for all sorts of analysis. For this reason, it is, as Conzen notes, the most popular theme in urban landscape analysis.

Examples of urban landscape analysis employ these conceptual devices. Ford (1992) uses a temporal study of the landscape to examine the role of the skyscraper in the built environment and using it to explain historical and economic trends. Arreola (1992) employs three of Conzen's themes, examining the change over time of plazas and plaza towns in various towns in south Texas. Stilgoe (1988) looks at suburban areas not through the landscape itself, but rather through the cultural output of the areas. Conversely, Schein (1997) uses the material landscape to make inferences about the urban culture. Forsyth (1997) applies Meinig's (1979) abstract notion of relative perspectives to a very real situation, attempting to reconcile groups with differing opinions of landscapes.

Ross (1999) conducts a unique study employing a number of Conzen's themes, Lewis's axioms, and Meinig's perspectives at various times. He lives for a time in Celebration, Florida, a community featuring many New Urban design features. The city is unique because it was built by Disney. Ross observes the urban landscape with a reporter's eye but through a resident's lens.

## **Methods**

This study will perform a landscape appraisal to examine if and to what extent the principles of New Urbanism are applied in three neighborhoods. A checklist of New Urban principles will be created, and each neighborhood will be evaluated to determine how many of these principles are evident. The results of this will not be the final results of the study, but rather the beginning of a more in-depth discussion of the application of the principles.

The Charter of the Congress of the New Urbanism lays out the basic tenets of New Urbanism, and it will serve as a guide. The first step was to identify and operationalize each of the principles of the Charter of the Congress of New Urbanism for the Neighborhood, District, and Corridor and the Block, Street, and Building (Lecesse and McCormick 2000). Although there are eighteen total points in these two sections of the charter, twenty-five total principles are identified, as several of the points contain multiple statements. Each of these is rephrased as a question (see Table 2).

**Table 2. The Charter Points Operationalized.**

Neighborhood, District, Corridor	
1	Are neighborhoods, districts, and corridors identifiable?
2	Are neighborhoods mixed-use?
2a	Are neighborhoods pedestrian-friendly?
2b	Are neighborhoods compact?
3	Are there many activities within walking distance?
4	Is there a range of housing types?
4a	Is there a range of housing prices?
5	Are there transit corridors?
5a	Are highways prevented from detracting from the center?
6	Is mass transit within walking distance?
7	Are civic buildings and schools integrated in the neighborhood?
8	Are there graphic design codes?
9	Are there a range of parks and conservation lands?
Block, Street, and Building	
1	Are the streets and public spaces shared use?
2	Are individual projects linked to their surroundings?
3	Does the development promote safe environments without sacrificing accessibility?
4	Does the street accommodate automobile and pedestrian traffic?
5	Do the streets and squares encourage walking?
6	Does the design grow from local climate, topography, history, and building practice?
6a	Does the design grow from local topography?
6b	Does the design grow from local history?
6c	Does the design grow from local building practice?
7	Are there distinctive civic buildings?
8	Do buildings provide a clear sense of location?
8a	Are natural elements of heating employed?
9	Does the development preserve history?

In order to more effectively conceptualize this lengthy list, the author grouped it into three categories: comprehensive design, transportation, and neighborhood design. The twenty-five questions are arranged into these three areas (see Table 3). Each neighborhood was evaluated to see how many of the principles it applies. Standards for

evaluating vague items such as a “range of housing types” and “many activities” are better defined using the Best Practices Guide to New Urbanism (Steuteville and Langdon 2003).

<b>Table 3. The Three Categories.</b>
<b>Comprehensive Design</b>
Are neighborhoods, districts, and corridors identifiable?
Are neighborhoods mixed-use?
Are neighborhoods pedestrian-friendly?
Are neighborhoods compact?
Is there a range of housing types?
Is there a range of housing prices?
Are there graphic design codes?
Is there a range of parks and conservation lands?
Does the development promote safe environments without sacrificing accessibility?
Does the design grow from local climate?
<b>Transportation</b>
Are there many activities within walking distance?
Are there transit corridors?
Are highways prevented from detracting from the center?
Is mass transit within walking distance?
Are the streets and public spaces shared use?
Does the street accommodate automobile and pedestrian traffic?
Do the streets and squares encourage walking?
<b>Neighborhood Design</b>
Are civic buildings and schools integrated in the neighborhood?
Are individual projects linked to their surroundings?
Does the design grow from local topography?
Does the design grow from local history?
Does the design grow from local building practice?
Are there distinctive civic buildings?
Do buildings provide a clear sense of location?
Are natural elements of heating employed?

In displaying the results, a simple three-point Likert scale is used. Each of the questions is answered with either a no, somewhat, or yes. These answers were assigned values of zero, one, and two, respectively. After the analysis, the values are totaled, and



the totals are each neighborhood's New Urban Index. Possible scores range from zero, which is not New Urban at all, to fifty, completely New Urban. No weighting is used, as key concepts such as mixing of uses and the focus on the pedestrian appear in several of the principles in various forms and are therefore already heavily weighted.

It is important to note that the New Urban Index is not the ultimate outcome of this research but rather the beginning of a discussion on the application of New Urbanism in Texas. Having the principles so clearly laid out provides an empirical foundation for analysis. The focus then turns to some of the "place-based" reasons for variation from the principles and their implications on the nature of local development.

### **Comprehensive Design, Transportation, and Neighborhood Design**

The first category, the comprehensive design scale, focuses on the overall design of the development, and its context. Districts are special single-use areas, and corridors are areas of connection, from transit lines to boulevards (Leccese and McCormick 2000). In answering the questions for this topic, this study looks at each neighborhood and its surroundings as well. A range of housing types includes a variety of single-family houses combined with multi-family apartments, row houses, accessory dwellings, and live-work units (Steuteville and Langdon 2003).

The second category, transportation, concerns three modes: walking, driving, and mass transit. There is a focus on safety, which is a common element of transportation design. The New Urbanist approach is a departure from conventional thinking on the topic however. Traffic calming devices such as roundabouts reduce the speed of traffic. Tighter turning radii make intersections easier for pedestrians to cross. Garages are located in the rear of the houses, reserving sidewalks in front for pedestrians' sole use.

These design features, combined with parallel on-street parking and street trees, creates safer pedestrian environment, while at the same time accommodating automobiles and emergency vehicles (Steuteville and Langdon 2003).

The third category focuses on design at the neighborhood scale. The questions in this category focus on buildings, blocks, and streets at the human scale. A mix of buildings is called for in the comprehensive design category. Here this mix is more clearly defined. Civic buildings are to be embedded in the neighborhood and clearly identifiable. Design should grow not just from the local climate, but also in the local style using existing topographic patterns with history and climate in mind. Projects should also be linked to their surroundings, and accessible not just by automobile but by other means as well.

Mixing of uses may be accomplished in a variety of ways. Vertical combination combines multiple uses in one building. Typically retail is located on the ground floor with residential above. Or, uses may be mixed horizontally, with an office or commercial use sharing a wall or adjacent to a residential use or area (Steuteville and Langdon 2003).

This framework intends to help construct a mental image of a complete New Urbanist neighborhood that I took into the field. Such a neighborhood has houses of various sizes and values on interconnected streets, with access to mass transit. There is a clear center, whether it is commercial, civic, or otherwise. Streets are designed for slower speeds, and sidewalks are inviting to walk along. The neighborhood is shielded from highways and highway-oriented development, though thoroughfares are still readily accessible. In answering the list of questions, I assessed how each neighborhood compares with the stated ideal as derived from the Charter of New Urbanism.

The initial results are displayed simply in tabular form, along with an examination of overall patterns and individual results for each community. Using standards directly from the Charter gives an overall indication of the “New Urban-ness” of each neighborhood, and dividing them into three categories highlights which aspects of design are applied and which are not. A discussion follows the tabular results explaining how scores were assigned. In cases where a development does not apply a principle of New Urbanism, or only does so partially (i.e. scores a zero or a one), the reasons for the differing design are examined in the discussion section, as are the potential effect on the application of other principles in the neighborhood. I have also noted instances where there is variation among the neighborhoods, where one or two applies a design principle while the others do not.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **LANDSCAPE APPRAISAL RESULTS**

#### **Overview**

To set up an empirical base to this analysis, I will explain the results from the landscape appraisal of the three study neighborhoods. This appraisal assists in summarizing the “New Urban-ness” of each neighborhood. These results stem from fieldwork conducted in November 2008.

A pattern emerges when examining the subtotals for each of the three categories of principles (see Table 4). Some principles are universally applied, and some are universally omitted. No neighborhood scores over 50% on the comprehensive design category. The scores for the transportation category are better overall than for the comprehensive design, largely because of the limited mixing of uses, identifiable districts and corridors, and graphic design codes. The presence of schools in Cotton Crossing and Plum Creek raise the scores for the neighborhood design category.

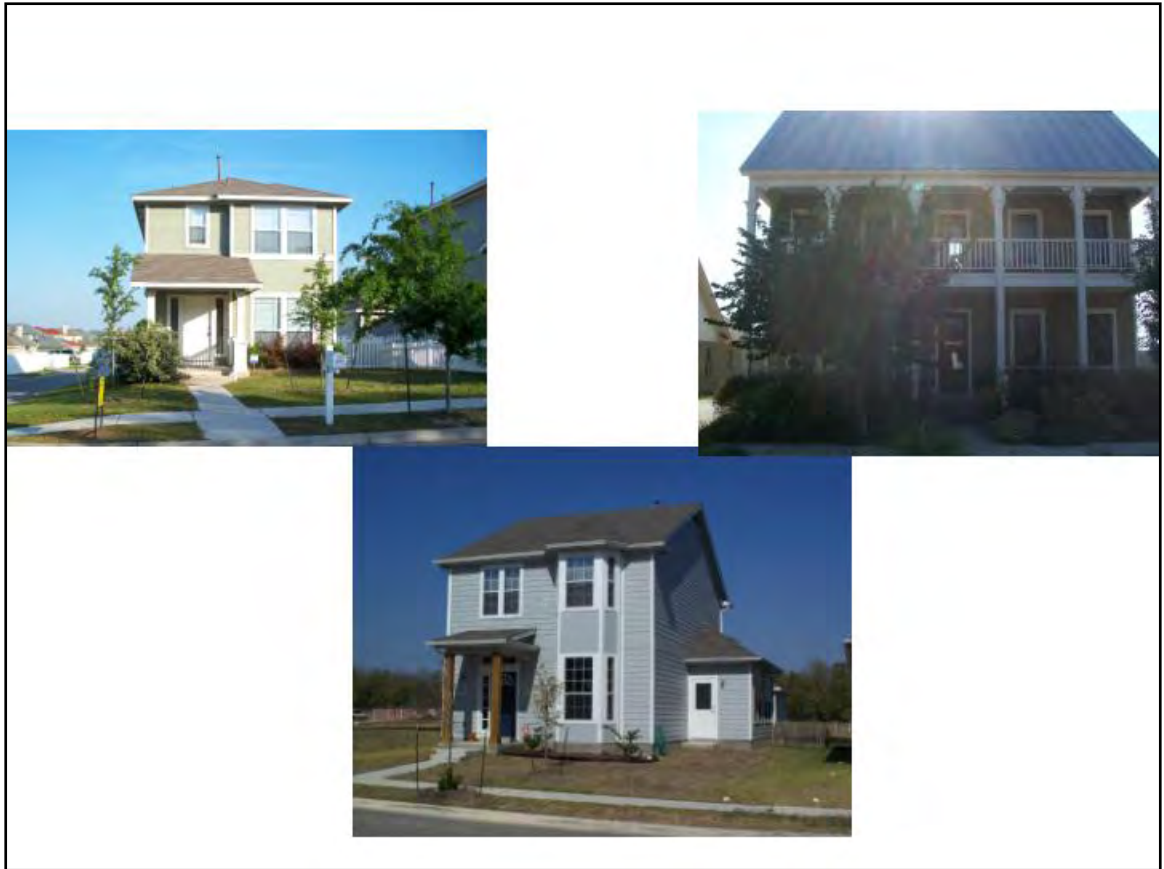
**Table 4. Results.**

Comprehensive Design	Blanco River Village	Plum Creek	Cotton Crossing
Are neighborhoods, districts, and corridors identifiable?	0	0	0
Are neighborhoods mixed-use?	0	1	1
Are neighborhoods pedestrian-friendly?	2	2	2
Are neighborhoods compact?	1	1	1
Is there a range of housing types?	1	1	0
Is there a range of housing prices?	1	1	0
Are there graphic design codes?	0	0	0
Is there a range of parks and conservation lands?	0	1	1
Does the development promote safe environments without sacrificing accessibility?	2	2	2
Does the design grow from local climate?	0	0	0
Total out of 20	7	9	7
	35.00%	45.00%	35.00%
Transportation			
Are there many activities within walking distance?	0	2	2
Are there transit corridors?	0	0	0
Are highways prevented from detracting from the center?	0	1	2
Is mass transit within walking distance?	0	0	0
Are the streets and public spaces shared use?	2	2	2
Does the street accommodate automobile and pedestrian traffic?	2	2	2
Do the streets and squares encourage walking?	2	2	2
Total out of 14	6	9	10
	42.86%	64.29%	71.43%
Neighborhood Design			
Are civic buildings and schools integrated in the neighborhood?	0	2	2
Are individual projects linked to their surroundings?	1	1	1
Does the design grow from local topography?	0	0	0
Does the design grow from local history?	0	0	0
Does the design grow from local building practice?	0	1	1
Are there distinctive civic buildings?	0	2	2
Do buildings provide a clear sense of location?	0	1	1
Are natural elements of heating employed?	0	0	0
Total out of 16	1	7	7
Percentage	6.25%	43.75%	43.75%
New Urban Index	14	25	24

### **Principles not Applied in all Three Neighborhoods**

The most obvious patterns are the cases where elements are absent from all three neighborhoods. One example of this is mass transit. There is no passenger rail in central Texas, though a line is under construction in Austin, and bus service outside of the major cities of Austin and San Antonio is sparse, consisting of sporadic service provided by regional transportation agencies. None of the neighborhoods is served by these. There are no well-defined districts or corridors as suggested by the Charter. Graphic design codes are absent from all three neighborhoods. They are each subject to standard urban codes regarding setbacks, lot design, and so forth, but there are not codes in place that visually guide the design of the structures.

Several elements of the neighborhood design category are not applied in any of the three neighborhoods. No natural methods of heating are evident, and the charter does not detail how this should be accomplished. Another element is mostly absent from all of the neighborhoods- the notion of building in the local style and incorporating local history and topography. All three developments have been significantly graded. The most common traditional styles in the study areas are Victorian and Craftsman homes. The houses in the neighborhoods are built with the basic “nonstyle” common to developments across the country. There are Craftsman-inspired homes and Victoriantesque homes, but these design elements are mostly generic, lacking true local influence (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Housing Styles in Plum Creek, Blanco River Village, and Cotton Crossing (left to right).**

### **Universally Applied Principles**

In contrast to the elements that are universally missing, there are several questions for which the answer is “yes” for all three neighborhoods. All of the neighborhoods have shared-use streets that are safe as defined by the New Urbanists (see Figure 4). All three neighborhoods have narrow streets, rear garages, street trees, and on-street parallel parking. These features reduce driving speeds, while creating an inviting route for pedestrians. Also, all three neighborhoods are compact, a result of small lots and reduced setbacks.



**Figure 4. Streetscapes in Plum Creek, Blanco River Village, and Cotton Crossing (left to right).**

### **Blanco River Village**

In the comprehensive design category, Blanco River Village scores the lowest of the three neighborhoods. There are fewer destinations within walking distance, both within the neighborhood and nearby. There is less of a variety of land use in Blanco River Village. There is currently no school or other civic building. Furthermore, in contrast to the other two neighborhoods, there does not appear to be any land designated commercial. As a result of the absences, there is no identifiable center, and the highway that passes in front of the neighborhood functions as its replacement. There is a bit of a range of housing types, however, with houses of various sizes, some with accessory dwelling areas, and an area for higher density “living courts.”

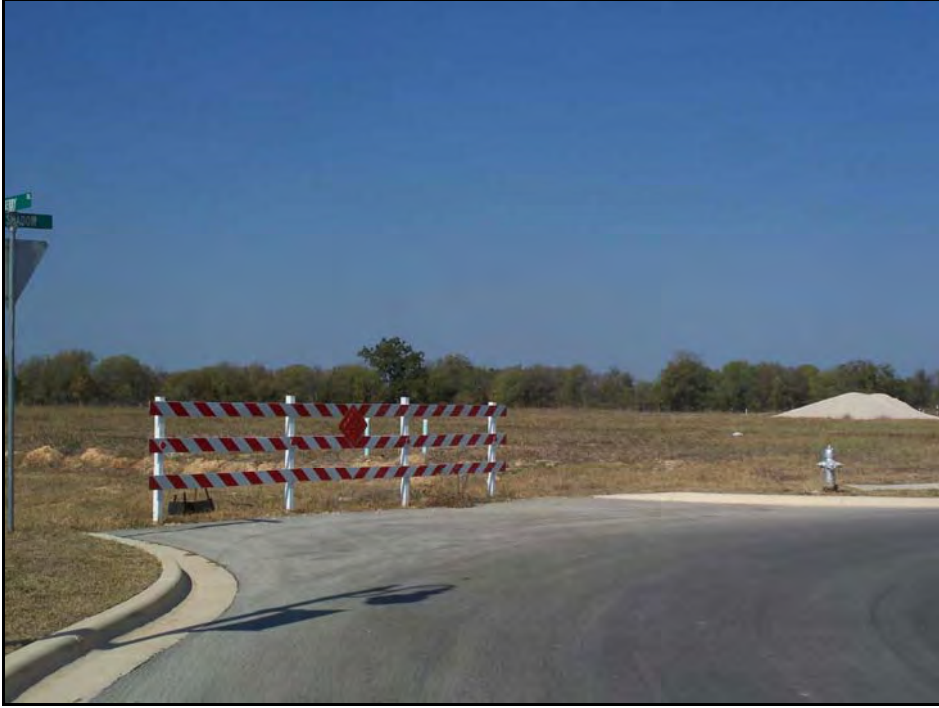


There are some parks and greenspaces, but it is not a comprehensive system. A small playground is located at one edge of the neighborhood. A detention pond has been utilized as a soccer field (see Figure 5). As with many modern housing developments, open space is provided only by converting land that cannot or should not be built upon. With this mindset, the question of the importance of parks in the neighborhood design is introduced and will be addressed in the following chapter.



**Figure 5. Parks in Blanco River Village.**

The results in the transportation category are mixed. There is the potential for a highly connective street network. Several of the streets stub out at the edge of the development, and could easily be extended as the vacant land around it is developed (see Figure 6). However, with no clear center within the neighborhood, the highway (State Highway 21) threatens to dominate the area.



**Figure 6. Stubout for Future Road.**

In the neighborhood design category, the score suffers from the lack of civic buildings. Also, though none of the study neighborhoods truly provides a clear sense of location, Blanco River Village does not provide any sense of location. Its distance from the center of San Marcos combined with the nondescript architecture results in a sense of placelessness.

### **Plum Creek**

Plum Creek is the largest, most well built-out neighborhood of the three, and as expected, in the comprehensive design category, Plum Creek scores the highest of the three neighborhoods. Plum Creek includes a range of housing styles, partially owing to the fact that it is a fairly large development with multiple builders. A school is located within the neighborhood, and combined with the nearby park, Plum Creek comes closest

to having an identifiable center. There are offices at the edge of the neighborhood, and there is more land dedicated for mixed-use development in the future (see Figure 7).

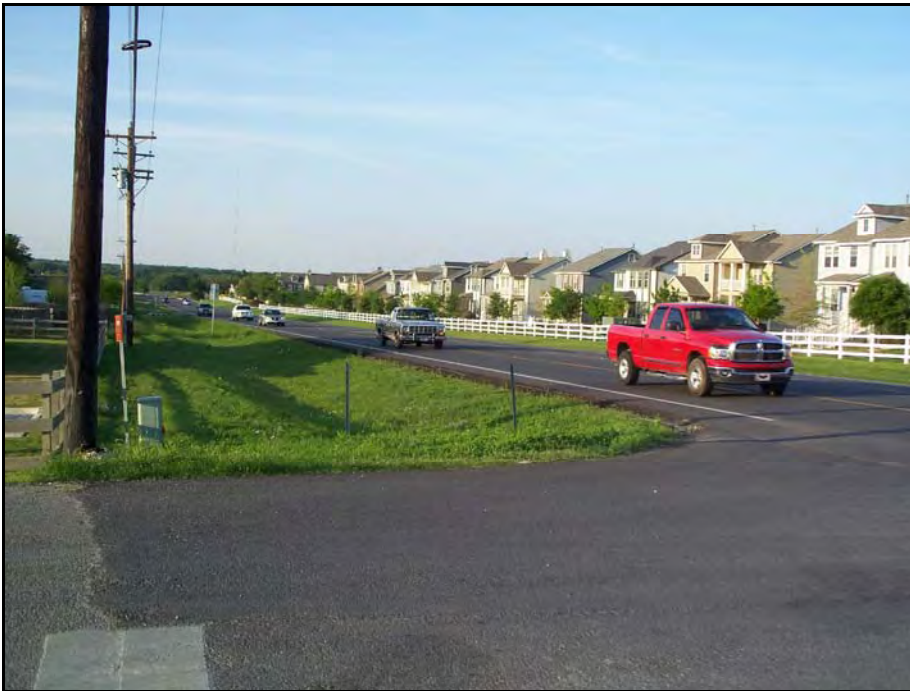


**Figure 7. Area Dedicated to Mixed-use in Plum Creek.**

In the neighborhood design category, Plum Creek again scores relatively high. Here again, the distinctive school contributes, not only because it is a civic building but also because it provides a nonresidential use and a destination for pedestrians. However, Plum Creek is not well connected to its surroundings. The highway (State Road 150) detracts from the center also disrupts pedestrian connections. The pedestrian-friendly sidewalks end at the edge of the neighborhood, and auto-oriented commercial strip centers are directly across the busy highway (see Figures 8 and 9).



**Figure 8. Strip Center across the Highway from Plum Creek.**



**Figure 9. Highway between Plum Creek and Commercial Center.**



### Cotton Crossing

Cotton Crossing's score on the comprehensive design is influenced by the fact that the neighborhood is within walking distance of Gruene, a historically restored area where restaurants, shops, and water recreational areas form a popular destination for locals and tourists. Where Cotton Crossing fronts the street to Gruene is a collection of small commercial buildings, built seemingly in the hope of connecting to Gruene. This commercial area, along with two nearby churches and several other destinations, account for a variety of uses within walking distance (see Figure 10).



**Figure 10. Retail at the Entrance along the Road to Gruene.**

Largely because of these human-scaled commercial buildings with pedestrian linkages, Cotton Crossing scores the highest of the three neighborhoods in the

transportation category. Cotton Crossing's design prevents the adjacent highway (Common Street) from detracting from the center. In fact, the neighborhood actually seems to be oriented away from the highway, toward Gruene (see Figure 11). Despite this, Cotton Crossing is not well connected to its surroundings. There are only two points of entry, and there do not appear to be stubouts for future connections.



**Figure 11. The Road to Gruene.**

In the neighborhood design category, Cotton Crossing scores the same as Plum Creek. However, the use of stone and numerous references to Gruene in shop names provide a clearer sense of location than in the other two neighborhoods.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION ON NEW URBANISM IN TEXAS

#### Assessment of Overall Results

The results of this study can be described as superficially enigmatic, but after considering the location and place of the communities, the results are somewhat expected. The three neighborhoods tend to score *highest* on the transportation category, despite the lack of transit. The comprehensive design category receives the middle score. This is somewhat surprising considering the fact that all are greenfield developments in areas where conventional auto-oriented development is the norm. They could have followed their marketing by boldly offering something different, rather they adapted New Urbanism to better fit into surrounding normative environs. The neighborhoods offer little in the way of variety of uses, housing, and modes of transportation, and they get little help from their surroundings. The lowest category across the communities is the neighborhood design category. This is not overly surprising given the difficulty in creating unique settings in a neoliberal era. The lack of civic buildings hurts Blanco River Village, but overall, the lack of local influence brings the scores down.

This may be a bit misleading, as some of the specific design elements common to the three study areas, and to an overwhelming majority of New Urban developments, are not specifically laid out in the Charter. For example, nearly all New Urban neighborhoods feature rear garages accessed from alleys behind the house. All three

neighborhoods in this study contain alleys. This is one of the most noticeable differences between New Urbanist neighborhoods and conventional suburbs, and to those with limited familiarity with the principles of New Urbanism, possibly its defining characteristic. But it is never specifically recommended or even mentioned in the Charter.

### **Temporal and Spatial Analysis**

Examining these neighborhoods in their temporal and spatial contexts begins to explain the lack of many suggested New Urban principles in these neighborhoods. The neighborhoods were built toward the end of the modern era, as reaction to modernism has resulted in a movement known as postmodernism. This is not to say that these are clear postmodern neighborhoods, but rather the New Urban narrative has been fragmented and deconstructed so much so that builders are more likely to pick and choose which design elements to feature and ignore. Also, the location of each of the neighborhoods in its respective town has implications on the built environment. The following sections will examine the effect the location of each neighborhood in time and space has on its design.

#### **The Temporal Factor: New Urbanism and Postmodernism**

These neighborhoods were conceived and constructed in a time of transition from modernism to postmodernism. New Urbanism is part of a manifestation of this trend toward postmodernism (Soja 2000). In this section, I will attempt to show that the disconnect between the ideals of New Urbanism and its application is indicative of a gap between the ideals of postmodernism (as I attempt to define the elusive concept) and the tangible changes these ideas are able to bring to the modernist urban landscape. New



Urbanism at the time of this study is best summarized as a modernist paradigm that is difficult to apply in a wholesale manner to an increasingly postmodern consumer culture.

### **Is New Urbanism Postmodern? Postmodernist Ideals,**

#### **Modernist Implementation**

The “postmodern” label appears to fit well to New Urbanism. The mixing of uses and housing types and values indicates a focus on diversity. Calling for the continuation of graphic design codes, along with local architecture, history, and topography, show an anti-Fordist approach. However, the results of this study indicate that these postmodern ideals are among the least likely to be applied. Instead, a number of modernist tactics are used to create these neighborhoods.

Despite the postmodern affinity for public involvement in the planning process and incremental design, all three neighborhoods in this study are master-planned. The developers held charrettes prior to and during construction, but they functioned more to sell the development’s marketing to current and potential residents than to obtain any real feedback that altered the overall design. Ironically, this “master-planned” modernist approach actually leads to a number of the successes in design, such as the safe, pedestrian-friendly streets, while at the same time sacrifices local influence by building in the modernist tradition using mass-produced materials, extensive grading, and generic architecture leading to more sterile community. Developing under modernist conditions necessitates this trade-off, but the result can be “modernist neighborhoods in postmodern disguise” (Ford 2001, 269).

Perhaps the neighborhoods are less postmodern because postmodernism itself is something of a mirage, a collection of criticisms of modernism and premodern styles and

forms. The key idea is that the postmodern discourse may have altered the design of these communities and created the “worst of both worlds” meaning the neighborhoods have been conceived and planned with modernist (antiquarian) ideology but the quality of construction leaves the observer to muse that the landscapes produced are simply postmodern copies without an original.

### **The Spatial Factor: Central Texas**

Designing and building a neighborhood as prescribed in the Charter is a considerable task in any location, and central Texas presents its own set of challenges. New Urbanism is a distinct contrast to the more common style of development in mid-size towns in central Texas. Large lot subdivisions are the norm. Streets are built for cars, wide and often lacking sidewalks. Commercial uses are often relegated to strips along Interstate 35, and residential areas are generally homogeneous. Or put another way, the modernist urban landscape dominates. In addition to the difficulty in creating dense, mixed-use neighborhoods without transit when the tract of land for the neighborhood is within the city limits, it is subject to zoning laws. While other parts of the country have more innovative and flexible methods of land-use regulation, these laws are fairly rigid in central Texas.

How can a development be built in the local style, as the principles of New Urbanism suggest, in an area where the dominant local style for the last fifty years has been generally counter to the rest of the design principles? Furthermore, how can a decidedly urban environment be created from scratch in a single subdivision in a previously predominantly rural setting? The local culture stacks the deck against an

urban-style development, and these neighborhoods sit like dense islands in a sea of large-lot development.

Market demand, or at least the perception of market demand, is another factor that alters the New Urban ideal. Developers believe, often with good cause, that residents in single-family neighborhoods are wary of living near multi-family structures or lower-priced housing. For this reason, neighborhoods tend to be fairly homogeneous, a collection of single-family houses of roughly the same value. In Texas, the trend has been toward larger lots and houses. This presents a clear problem for a philosophy of providing a variety of housing types and values. The greenfield setting, particularly in Plum Creek and Blanco River Village, further adds to the difficulty in several ways. Without other residents nearby, there is a smaller customer base for retail. There are no districts and corridors, and there are fewer activities in walking distance.

### **A Contrast in Setting: Kyle, New Braunfels, and San Marcos**

With this history and pattern of growth, it is natural to ask why these developments are located in central Texas. The answer is different for each town, because, despite their close proximity and regional similarities, each has its own unique housing market, political climate, and planning priorities. The reasons behind the location of the neighborhoods help to provide a greater understanding of the limited application of New Urbanist principles.

#### **Kyle**

Plum Creek in Kyle is but one of many residential subdivisions in Kyle. The developer was an adherent to the Duany/Plater-Zyberk school of New Urbanism, but the New Urbanist design elements in Plum Creek serve only to distinguish the neighborhood

from the other bedroom subdivisions that abound in Kyle. With no major employment centers, Kyle's biggest asset is its proximity to Austin, and the city has capitalized on it, attracting an array of residential subdivisions. The rapid rate of population growth in Chapter 2, Table 1 is evidence of this. Plum Creek is the sole example of New Urbanism in Kyle, and it is surrounded by conventional suburban subdivisions, whether they were built before or after Plum Creek. This indicates that Plum Creek is an anomaly, that the modern/postmodern shift is less relevant here as Kyle is less interested in promoting postmodern development than in promoting development in general. In this way, Plum Creek is more of a novelty than a shift in housing strategy.

#### New Braunfels

The situation in New Braunfels is different. Although, unlike Kyle, the city has stated goals that align with New Urban principles, including encouraging mixing of uses and innovative and flexible design patterns (City of New Braunfels 2007). In theory, Cotton Crossing is the prime example of mixing uses in New Braunfels. The lack of other neighborhoods that fit the goals stated by the city indicates that it has done little to foster development with these ideals. Cotton Crossing exists as it does because of its proximity to Gruene. Density and walkability are assets to the development here, but in the rest of New Braunfels, their importance is minimal as the market seems to prefer large lots and semi-rural, exurban development.

The subtext to this story lies in the relationship of New Braunfels with surrounding Comal County. In many instances, these city/county political relationships are hostile as they have competing interests, yet here this is a symbiotic relationship as New Braunfels wants to add tax base without people by becoming the sales tax location

for housing and population growth sprawling across Comal County. In this way, New Braunfels wants to expand its tax base through commercial expansion not population expansion. If they encourage population growth in the unregulated county area, this will favor personal property rights, limit infrastructure demands, keep taxes low and preserve the local conservative or libertarian political mindset. This is clearly evident in the Comal County growth as well as New Braunfels reluctance to annex territory in their Extra Territorial Jurisdiction.

### San Marcos

San Marcos has several features that distinguish it from Kyle and New Braunfels. The most obvious is Texas State University-San Marcos. In addition to adding almost 30,000 young students to the town's population and providing a larger employment center than exists in either Kyle or New Braunfels, the university brings with it a knowledge of and desire for a greater variety of development, which has permeated from the university to the city staff and the city's boards and commissions. Partly because of this, Blanco River Village is one of several non-conventional developments built or planned in San Marcos, including a mixed-use downtown apartment complex and several other New Urbanist-style neighborhoods.

Given this climate, it is surprising that Blanco River Village would score the lowest. In addition to the problems with postmodernism, several factors are responsible. Given the remote location of the neighborhood and the fact that it was planned as a single-family area alone, the developer appears less interested in the principles of New Urbanism than the developer of Plum Creek. The developer was able to increase the density of the neighborhood without sacrificing land for additional parks or green space.

Further, the city did not take steps to increase the number of New Urbanist principles by encouraging a mixing of uses or requiring more local or distinct architecture. The large student population is a hindrance, as the town's residents of living near apartment complexes, or any structure that could house students. The public perception is that these single-family and multi-family should not mix.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Summary**

This research had several goals. The first was to assess the implementation of New Urbanist principles in central Texas. This assessment reveals that in the neighborhoods evaluated, many principles are not applied. The next goal was to examine the temporal and spatial setting in an attempt to understand why this is the case. The neighborhoods were evidence of the problem of implementing modernist ideas and selling to a fickle, diverse housing consumer. The setting in central Texas was also shown to be important at various scales, as all three neighborhoods are surrounded by similar patterns of sprawl growth but exist in three distinctly different towns.

More broadly, this study shows the difficulty of developing in unconventional ways, the impact of market forces on design, and the importance of a neighborhood's setting. This indicates that New Urban developments are not the same everywhere, and that local factors play a very large role in this variation. This research takes the essential first step in evaluating the proposition that neotraditional neighborhoods will lead to a close-knit, diverse, vital community by creating a more accurate way to describe these neighborhoods.

While there are many ways of critiquing neotraditional design, this research provides an empirical frame for evaluating the "New Urban-ness" of neighborhoods

across the landscape. While the focus is on Central Texas, it is likely that similar stories exist in peer projects in suburban plots across the United States. An important message is that neotraditional design may not work everywhere as well as it does in central cities or in large-scale neighborhood developments incorporated around a common theme. This design needs a lot of support in both social and economic capital and from the surrounding urban environment to succeed so the future of engaging neotraditional neighborhoods may be somewhat bleak. This study clearly underscores the fact that New Urbanism remains at a “boutique level” in the broad housing narrative and makes important progress in very limited, local contexts.

### **Opportunities for Further Research**

Several elements not addressed in this study hold great opportunity for future research. This research is really only the beginning of examining the application of alternative and innovative urban design principles. An obvious next step is to explore the ramifications of the missing design elements. A more quantitative study could use the points from the charter to examine questions such as which principles are most commonly applied, and what is the relationship between certain principles and variables such as sense of community. Also, performing a factor or cluster analysis could test the relationship of the principles to one another.

The concepts behind this research could also be used to examine the application of other new design types such as transit-oriented development or form-based codes. These would be particularly interesting to evaluate because of the greater role of local governments. How does the interaction between developer and municipality affect the



built environment? What ideals are lost in the process? Most importantly, what is the effect of straying from the guiding concepts of design?

Moving away from defining neighborhoods as either New Urban or conventional presents a chance for more research. The ultimate goal is that this either/or, black or white characterization can be replaced with a more nuanced description that will more accurately reflect the nature of the neighborhood. For instance, a proposed neighborhood can be defined as neotraditional residential, if it does not contain a mixing of uses. This could of use to planners and developers in the neighborhood design phase, to have a more realistic idea of what to expect from proposed developments, and also to those who study the potential benefits of these development principles. As our society reacts to higher fuel prices and a general decline in social community embededness, will New Urbanism be viewed as a broad panacea or simply continue as a boutique alternative to typical sprawl?

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## **VITA**

John Foreman was born in Houston, Texas, on July 29, 1979, the son of Louise Foreman and Dennis Foreman, and was raised in Bellville, Texas. In 1997 he graduated from Bellville High School, and after receiving an Associate's degree from Blinn College in Brenham, Texas, he enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin. During the summer of 2001, he studied at Oxford University in England, and he earned his Bachelor of Arts in 2003. In January 2005, he entered the Graduate College of Texas State University-San Marcos. While attending Texas State, he worked in the Planning Department of the City of San Marcos.

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This thesis was typed by John V. Foreman.