

WHAT IS GOOD URBANISM?¹

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Abstract. Across the globe, we are currently undergoing a paradigm shift that is fostering a felicitous turn in urban design, place-making, and community building. This “good urbanism” begins with appreciative inquiry and engages in meaningful co-creation, enabling us to envision best possibilities and rally resources to realize them. Good urbanism adds a few instruments to our planning and design toolkits that enhance the health and well-being of places and move beyond sustainability to prosperity.

Keywords: good urbanism, sustainability, prosperity, co-creation, complementary urbanism, sideways urbanism, slow, flows, local.

Good urbanism is ...

Gift-based

Good urbanism builds upon what is integral to people and locales – their *prima materia* or DNA. It enhances places by revealing and celebrating these existing gifts, rather than focusing on deficits and problems. The gifts may include natural landscapes, buildings, neighbor-

hoods, businesses, cultural institutions, history and cultural traditions, as well as the talents, ideas, and skills of stakeholders.

Hence, good urbanism supplants the hierarchy of needs (fig. 1) with a hierarchy of gifts (fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943)

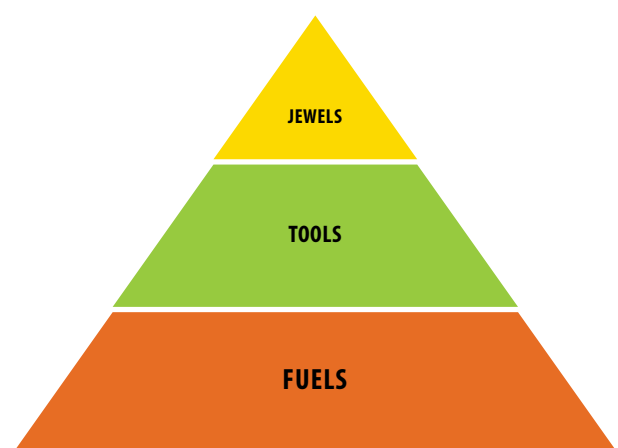


Fig. 2. Hierarchy of Gifts

¹ Adapted from *Good Urbanism: Six Steps to Creating Prosperous Places* (2012, Island Press)

From Fuels at the base (sun, water, food, wind, fossil fuels, and other energy sources) and Tools above (knowledge, intuition, and skills; construction, machine, and digital tools; and communication, transportation, and building technologies), the hierarchy of gifts suggests we can extract Jewels.

Good communication (writing, speaking, etc.) about places similarly begins with an appreciation for what is working, thereby offering inspiration and instruction. In contrast, the modernist genre of criticism focuses on what is not working, typically offering cautionary tales about what not to do.

Complementary

Just as complementary medicine looks at the whole person including the physical environment, a complementary urbanism looks at the whole environment, including people. Similar to complementary currencies – such as travel miles, time banking, and local currencies – good urbanism complements what is already there rather than attempt to replace it, or compete with it. It protects what is valued, enhances what

may be underperforming, and then builds upon this *tabula plena* (full slate), rather than presume a *tabula rasa* (erased slate) (fig. 3).

Inclusive and sideways

Good urbanism is co-creative, inviting a wide range of professionals and stakeholders to participate, welcoming them when they do, and partnering to bring ideas to life (fig.4).

Good urbanism is not top-down, but nor is it bottom-up. It proceeds sideways, beginning with an idea hatched by one or more people who quickly include others to refine and realize the vision so that decision-makers, urban design professionals, and communities are working together toward mutually-beneficial ends. Combining the “hierarchy of needs” with the “hierarchy of assets”, this rotated pyramid might look something like this (fig. 5).

When community erodes, an “architecture of fear” occupies the void (Ellin 1997). Good urbanism offers an “architecture of love” (Ellin 2012) that fosters community by cultivating relationships through a process that builds mutually supportive networks of people.



Fig. 3. The *tabula plena* approach protects what is valued first, enhances what may be underperforming, and then adds new elements informed by effective community engagement



Fig. 4. Co-creation: Invite, Welcome, Partner

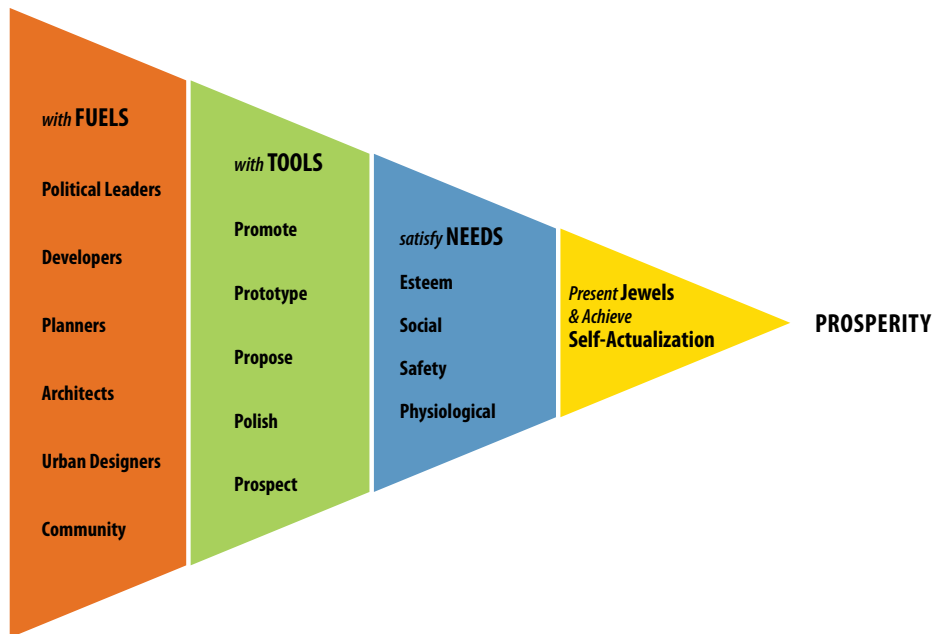


Fig. 5. Prosperity pyramid: a sideways urbanism

Idealistic and incremental

Good urbanism aims to create prosperous places where all people can live prosperous lives. It measures success in terms of such prosperity, rather than power, profit, and prestige. The Path toward Prosperity follows a virtuous spiral of six steps: Prospect, Polish, Propose, Prototype, Promote, and Present (fig. 6). It is an economy of gifts, beginning with gifts and ending with them.

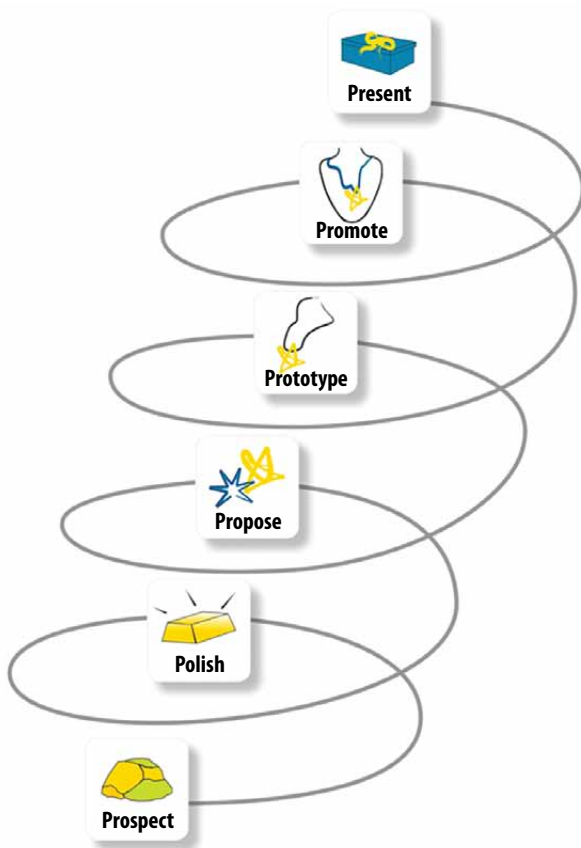


Fig. 6. The six steps along the path toward prosperity

Professional and proactive

While inclusive, good urbanism relies upon the expertise and experience of professional urban designers, architects, planners, and landscape architects – typically working in teams. In addition to providing technical skills, these professionals bring an understanding of which building traditions are appropriate for any given situation – the humanist, landscape ecology, systems, and/or form-making avant-garde. Often, good urbanism draws innovatively from several traditions.

Slow, flow, low, and local

Placing a brake on rapid change and the havoc it can wreak, good urbanism embraces **slowness**, coinci-

dent with the Slow City and Slow Food movements. Beginning with what is integral to places and people, good urbanism finds existing **flows** and goes with them, and/or unblocks them to clear physical as well as social blockages, engaging in urban acupuncture. The most simple, elegant, and efficient solutions are often **low-tech** and low-impact, for instance, the use of swales, cisterns, and graywater instead of sewers and municipal water, along with urban agriculture replacing nonproductive right-of-ways, grass lawns and the purchase of produce from grocery stores. The mantra of the moment is grow, eat, shop, hire, incubate (ideas, technologies, and businesses), and generate (energy) **local** (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. 'How Local Can You Go?', outside Whole Foods in Salt Lake City

A Process as well as a Product

Good urbanism describes both an approach to enhancing places for people and the resulting places. Those who practice it design the process, sharpening other tools of the trade and lending to a successful product. Good urbanism envisions best possibilities and rallies resources to realize them. It is not principally tactical, instead combining strategy with serendipity.

Generative and Integrative

The process as well as the product creates synergies and efficiencies. Good urbanism sets a generative and dynamic self-adjusting feedback mechanism into motion, enabling clients and other stakeholders to build creatively upon their strengths in an ongoing fashion.

Part of a Worldwide Movement with No Name

The momentum currently gathering toward good urbanism figures within what Paul Hawken has de-

scribed as a worldwide “movement with no name” that will prevail because it is not based on ideology, but on the identification of what is humane, behaving like an immune system (Hawken 2007) to heal social and urban malaise. Though it may have no name, some keywords and characteristics of this new paradigm are (fig. 8).

Transformative

Good urbanism can transmute problems into opportunities by revealing blessings that may be disguised and making virtue of necessity. Moving beyond sustainability to prosperity, it envisions and realizes better futures in a world that needs them now more than ever (fig. 9).



Fig. 8. Keywords and characteristics of the new paradigm as word clouds

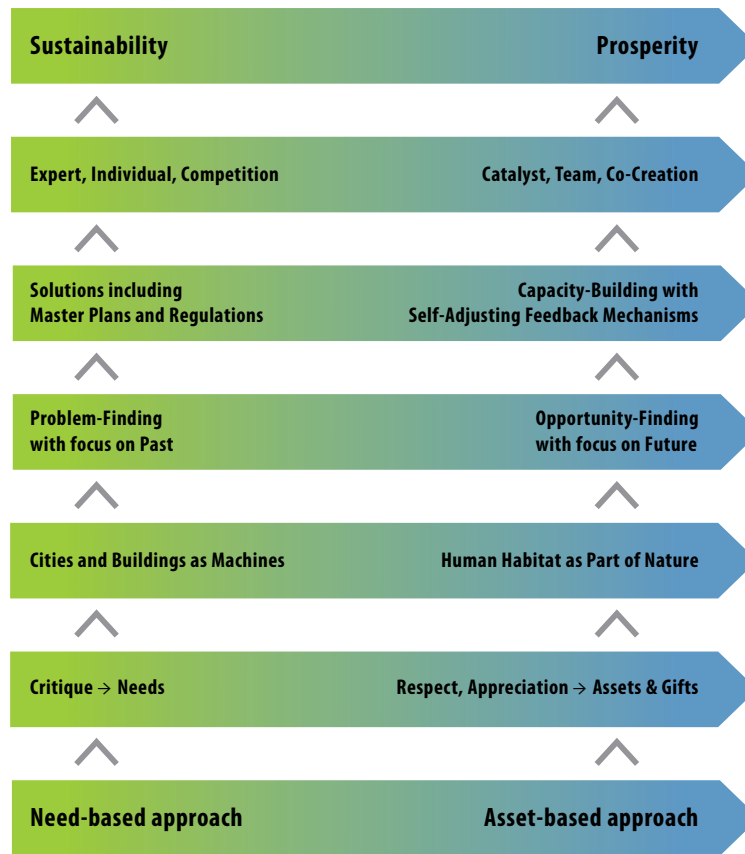


Fig. 9. The shift from sustainability to prosperity

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