

MILWAUKEE SENTINEL

Heated debate over race, class erupts at urbanism conference

Author's comments ignite crowd at otherwise calm session on gentrification

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A generally sedate conference on city-building erupted Saturday into a shouting match over issues of race and class.

The exchange, at the seventh annual meeting of the Congress for the New Urbanism, laid bare some prickly questions beneath the congress' push to build urban revitalization along the lines of traditional, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods:

Must the poor get shoved aside as housing values escalate in rejuvenating areas? What will it take for whites and blacks, the rich and the poor, to live comfortably side by side?

At a panel in the Pabst Theater titled "Creating Wealth: Revitalization and Gentrification," the discussion was lively but polite until a question and answer period. Then writer James Howard Kunstler rose to speak from the audience.

Blacks, he said impatiently, should stop blaming all their problems on whites. "Tell your kids to be nicer to white people. Turn your baseball hats around, get interested in reading and quit trying to scare everyone."

Kunstler, the author of an anti-sprawl book, "The Geography of

Nowhere," said the real challenge for people worried about gentrification - usually defined as neighborhood renewal that displaces poor, mostly minority residents with affluent whites - is not race but behavior and culture. "The age of crybabies is over. Let's do something else. Let's all be Americans together."

He may have intended a message of unity but the result was nearly chaos. A woman in the audience, her voice shaking, said Kunstler's remarks were "like saying, 'If you don't want to get raped, don't wear short skirts anymore.' "

Other audience members hurled insults at Kunstler, who shouted back. And one of the panelists, Edward Robbins, said angrily: "You can't allow such absurd, racist things to go unanswered." Robbins, a professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, said racism is indeed a major impediment to economic progress for blacks; developers, meanwhile, get richer from subsidies involved in gentrifying older neighborhoods, he charged.

Another panelist, Charles Buki, injected class into the debate. "What are you going to do about Billy Bob?" he asked. "I don't want to live next door to a redneck who's repairing his truck." Nor do most people, he said, want to live next to people who are radically different from themselves.

Buki, who works for the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corp. in Washington, D.C., said flatly that gentrification was a good thing - a sign that neighborhoods are dynamic generators of wealth. And he faulted New Urbanists for putting too much emphasis on small-scale, pedestrian-oriented design and ignoring the fact that even high-rise apartment buildings can be desirable places to live in if people take care of them.

New Urbanism also took its licks from Robbins, who said that the movement tended to romanticize the virtues of small-town life. Some small towns have no sense of community, he said, and others have so much of it that anyone who looks different is unwelcome. In a nation of strangers, he said, the trick is to build "a truly civil society that's not

exclusive."

Michael Pyatok, an architect practicing in the San Francisco Bay area, faulted New Urbanists for facilitating gentrification "under the guise of working for a better community simply because it looks better (when), in fact, they're disassembling it," leaving blacks, Hispanics and single-parent households adrift.

Activism against speculators can slow gentrification, Pyatok said, citing examples in Oakland. He also urged that non-profit groups and others push for the inclusion of affordable housing amid pricier development, as was done in Seattle.

Jobs, good social services and community participation are the critical factors in stabilizing neighborhoods, he said. While good design can help change "misguided stereotypes" about the poor, it can't by itself create healthy communities, he emphasized.

Another stereotype - that all conservatives hate mass transit - was exploded when Paul Weyrich, head of the right-leaning Free Congress Research and Education Foundation, made a surprise appearance at the conference. Weyrich, a longtime rail buff, unveiled a study by his group that he said would rebut critics who claim that transit carries only about 1% of total trips. The study found that transit ridership is growing in cities that have high-quality, accessible service.

Weyrich's study argued that transit serves other conservative goals: promoting economic development, especially around light rail stops; helping the poor move off welfare and into jobs; and "strengthening the bonds of community."

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