

A CALL FOR NEW RURALISM

by Sibella Kraus



New Ruralism is a framework for creating a bridge between Sustainable Agriculture and New Urbanism. Sustainable agriculture can help bring cities down to earth, to a deeper commitment to the ecology and economy of the surrounding countryside on which they depend. New Ruralism embraces the power of place-making that can help American agriculture move from an artificially narrow production focus to encompass broader resource preservation values. As a place-based and systems-based framework, the New Ruralism nurtures the symbiotic relationship between urban and rural areas. To build this bridge, and with support from the Columbia Foundation, the Institute of Urban & Regional Development (IURD) and Sustainable Agriculture Education (SAGE) are jointly launching a project on New Ruralism.

Here are some ideas about what this could mean.

THE RATIONALE FOR NEW RURALISM

To thrive and endure, regions and the cities within them need a vital local agricultural system that encompasses individual farms, rural communities, and stewardship of natural resources. As it stands, rural areas - especially those at the urban edge - face enormous challenges. In California, as in many parts of the developed world, agricultural operations near cities are under extreme pressure from suburbanization, environmental degradation, and an industrialized and globalized farm economy. Urban areas are contending with the flip side of this problem: the multiple costs of sprawl and a national crisis of diet-, exercise-, and built environment-related health problems. Too many urban residents are increasingly overfed and undernourished. They are disconnected from rural and natural surroundings that further recede with increasing low-den-

sity auto-dependent urbanization. In many ways, industrialized agriculture and urban sprawl are similar blights, both operating with little regard to the natural conditions of the landscape and oblivious to the ecological and cultural uniqueness of place.

New Ruralism is built on twenty years of reform - in food, agriculture, and land use planning. The sustainable agriculture and local food systems movements have taken organic foods mainstream, made farmers' markets a basic town-center amenity, and put "slow food" on a fast track. At the same time, New Urbanism projects and Smart Growth initiatives have demonstrated the possibilities of creating healthier, more livable urban centers. Communities large and small are utilizing smart growth tools to create mixed use, pedestrian-friendly and transit-oriented developments; to encourage infill, revitalize downtowns, institute 'green' building policies, and better balance the growth of jobs and housing. New Urbanism acknowledges farmland and nature to be as "important to the metropolis as the garden is the house". Yet approaches for strengthening the vitality of surrounding rural areas as a means to contain and sustain cities have not been thoroughly investigated. In many ways, New Ruralism is now where New Urbanism and Smart Growth were two decades ago - powerful ideas that were being generated mostly by professionals, out of sight of public and academic views.

VISION

Just as New Urbanists and 'critical regionalists' have articulated and demonstrated the potential for a renewed movement of place-affirming urban planning, our regional rural areas need a similar call to action. We are positing New Ruralism as a corollary of

New Urbanism with a related framework of principles, policies, and practices, and with the following as its preliminary vision statement:

New Ruralism is the preservation and enhancement of urban edge rural areas as places that are indispensable to the economic, environmental, and cultural vitality of cities and metropolitan regions.

New Ruralism draws from past models. Some obvious examples are the agrarian context for the 'Garden City' and the self-sufficiency elements of eco-villages. New Ruralism also incorporates current initiatives, such as sustainable city charters, local food policy councils, the agricultural land trust movement, and mechanisms to preserve and enhance regional agriculture and its natural resource base. Most importantly, New Ruralism can harness marketplace forces such as demand for rural lifestyle, countryside view, and food with 'terroir' (a taste of place).

The geography for New Ruralism can be generally defined as rural lands within urban influence; the larger the metropolis, the larger the field of influence. The geographical structure of metropolitan regions extends out from the urban-rural interface and the rural-urban fringe to exurbia and beyond, to urban-influenced farmland. It is too often a contested landscape of transitional land uses, speculative land values, regulatory uncertainty, and impermanent agriculture. The current default attitude in this area is that metropolitan agriculture inevitably dissolves and retreats as the urban footprint expands.

Within this field of urban influence, the New Ruralism movement would help create permanent agricultural preserves as sources of fresh food for the larger urban region, and as places for nurturing urban connections with the land. These could take the form of green



food belt perimeters, buffers between urban areas, small agricultural parks at the urban-rural interface, or bigger preserves further a-field that include larger farms and rural settlements. This vision must work hand in hand with the New Urbanism vision of compact mixed-use urbanized areas, the elimination of low-density auto-dependent sprawl, and distinct “edges” between towns and their surrounding rural working lands.

PRINCIPLES

These ideas for a vision and geography for New Ruralism provide a starting point for some preliminary principles.

New Ruralism would denote specific, named rural places located near an urban area and part of a broader metropolitan region. Such New Ruralist places would have an identity rooted in their unique and significant agricultural, ecological, geographical, and cultural attributes. This identity would contribute to a broader regional sense of place, through local farm products, rural activities, iconic landscape, and opportunities for public experience. These rural places may also have general designations as agricultural preserves or ‘appellations’ or ‘local food belts’.

The primary land use would be small to medium scale sustainable agriculture integrated and overlapping with areas for wildlife and habitat management and for passive recreation.

Conducive agronomic conditions and agricultural history would be primary factors determining the location of such agricultural preserves. Other factors would include dedicated current farmers and identified aspiring farmers; crops and livestock distinctive to the place; processing and marketing infrastructure; affordable housing on farms or in nearby communities for farm employees; and regulations supportive of value-added enterprises and agritourism operations. The ‘Wild Farm’ movement demonstrates the potential value of this kind of multi-functional agriculture.

Urban-rural connectivity would be a multi-faceted exchange. A major linkage would be in the form of ‘locally grown food’, promoted through direct marketing channels and through institutional networks. ‘Local food-shed’ is an attribute ripe for quantification and even certification, due to its value-added connotation of fresh, healthy and flavorful food and its potential for public access and interaction. (Such a place-

based designation has long been used for wines and is now being used for crops tied to place and method of production.) Connectivity would also take the form of physical links to urban green spaces and to regional hiking, equestrian, and biking trail systems. Another linkage is the arena of environmental services. Services such as green waste composting, aquifer recharge, flood and fire protection, and preservation of biodiversity would be part of the urban-rural economic exchange and would help re-establish the value of the ecological structures that underlie the jurisdictional patchwork.

New Ruralist agricultural preserves would welcome the public as both visitors and residents. One of the highest values of rural areas near cities is their attraction as homesites for people who are not farmers. With careful planning, this bane can be a boon. Affirmative agriculture easements and projects such as Vineyard Estates in Livermore and the Croe¹ model in New England demonstrate the potential for successful symbiosis of estate homes with agriculture, as valued landscape. However, the benefits of country life should not be limited to the wealthy.

Images are courtesy of Karen Preuss, Larry Jacobs, Kate Kline May, Greenbelt Alliance, and SAGE.



Following both the demand for 'rural lifestyle' and the trend for the 'not-so-big-house', clustered, modest non-farm rural home homesites have the potential to be a key value proposition for preserving agricultural land, especially if they are strictly limited and their value is tied in to the local agricultural economy. Perhaps these homeowners can purchase a "share" of the farm production along with their modest dwellings.

The development and management of each agricultural preserve would be guided by a comprehensive plan. Such a plan could be established and implemented as a joint powers agreement between city and county agencies where necessary. Broader regulations and incentives would likely also come into play. The key to establishing rural places reflecting metropolitan regional values is a holistic approach that integrates a wide range of goals for public health, conservation, economic development, housing, agricultural productivity, and more. Within a template framework, each plan might also have specific quantified objectives, such as goals for local food production or local jobs or educational programs. Through these plans, New Ruralist places would cap-

ture and compensate landowners for specific "public good" amenities provided for the local town or broader metropolitan region.

In summary, these ideas for a New Ruralism vision and principles are exploratory, intended to provoke discussion and response. Key questions are:

How can the concept of New Ruralism be most useful for advancing the common goals of sustainable agriculture/local food systems movement and the new urbanism/smart growth movement?

Does New Ruralism provide a meaningful framework for analyzing past models and present initiatives for harmonizing city and countryside? What are the key elements required for it to succeed and what long term benefits would accrue from these successes?

Can New Ruralism be applied as a construct in actual planning projects and be advanced into governmental regulations?

Can a New Ruralist vision, illuminat-

ed by key models, help galvanize the public support and private investment necessary to create urban edge agricultural preserves?

During the coming months, through workshops and white papers, IURD and SAGE plan to continue to explore these and other questions. We welcome your thoughts on our preliminary ideas.

1. The Qroe Company develops and manages real estate properties that integrate conservation, farming and housing.

The New Ruralism project is supported by a grant from the Columbia Foundation.

Sibella Kraus is the Project Director, Institute of Urban & Regional Development New Ruralism Initiative and the President of Sustainable Agriculture Education.