

# THE GOSPEL AND THE FUTURE OF CITIES: A CALL TO ACTION

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*Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. Genesis 2:8*

*And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. Isaiah 58: 12*

*Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. Jeremiah 29:7*

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. . . No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.” Revelation 21:3 & 22:3*

## HISTORY AND INTENT OF THE CALL TO ACTION

There are times in history when it is imperative that God’s people come together to pray, seek discernment and act. Such a time was the gathering of evangelical Christians convened by the *World Evangelical Alliance (WEA)* and *Micah Global* for the *Gospel and the Future of Cities Summit* October 15 – 16, 2016 in Quito, Ecuador.

The gathering was crucial for several reasons. The first was the need to build on two seminal evangelical declarations—the Lausanne Movement’s 2010 *Cape Town Commitment*<sup>2</sup>, and the 2012 Lausanne/WEA Creation Care Network’s *Creation Care and the Gospel: Call to Action*.<sup>3</sup> We reaffirm the *Cape Town Commitment*’s statement on cities that “We must love our cities as God does, with holy discernment and Christ-like compassion, and obey his command to ‘seek the welfare of the city’, wherever that may be.”<sup>4</sup> The *Gospel and the Future of Cities Summit* especially wanted to take seriously the concomitant charge that “Church and mission leaders worldwide [should give] urgent strategic attention to urban mission.”

We also reaffirm the *Creation Care and the Gospel: Call to Action* statement pertaining to cities recognizing that “rural and urban design and living” has a significant practical bearing on how to care for creation. We especially wanted to take up the statement’s bold challenge to undertake more detailed work to provide in-depth guidance for Christians in this area.

Inspired by these earlier statements; as witnesses to the enormous spiritual, social, economic, and environmental challenges posed by today’s rapidly urbanizing world; and in response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit; the intent of this call to action is to motivate and activate the whole church to more deeply understand, love, and care for cities and their inhabitants from God’s perspective, and to become better equipped and effective for urban presence, ministry, work,

and witness. The broader world is also challenged by the future of cities in these times. It was this urgency that provided the second reason for convening the *Gospel and the Future of Cities Summit* in Quito. Immediately following the summit was *Habitat III*—a global conference on urbanism organized every twenty years by the United Nations that in this instance drew together over 45,000 global leaders.<sup>5</sup> The document that was produced through the *Habitat III* process, and signed by all the member governments of the United Nations is entitled *The New Urban Agenda*. Its call for more sustainable, resilient, safe, equitable, healthy, and inclusive cities, was an historic moment worthy of the church's attention and encouragement.

Indeed, *Habitat III* galvanized a moment for the global evangelical community to join the world and come together to pray for the world's cities, and to discuss and reflect on biblical truths as they apply to cities, integral urban mission, and care of creation in today's historical context. The outcomes of *The Gospel and the Future of Cities Summit* provided a platform for evangelical delegates attending *Habitat III* to engage in global dialogue about urbanism from an evangelical perspective undergirded by the consensus generated at the summit. Because the gospel applies to all aspects of life and creation, including the wellbeing individuals and communities can derive from living in cities; and because evangelical Christians faithfully following the gospel have an historic and abiding concern for cities and their inhabitants, and thus the world's urban future; *Habitat III* was not an event for Christians to miss.

Our Summit drew together theologians, scholars, pastors, Christian leaders, architects, urban planners, community organizers, and creation care practitioners from around the world under the auspices of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the Lausanne/WEA Creation Care Network, Micah Global, and the Urban Shalom Society. ***This is a call to action for Christians to engage with urban challenges and opportunities, including UN-Habitat's New Urban Agenda.***

## OUR CONVICTIONS

Our discussion, study, and prayer together led us to the following two convictions.

***Concern for all forms of human urbanism — be they large aggregates such as cities, or smaller aggregates such as towns, villages or neighborhoods — truly is a gospel issue within the lordship of Christ.***<sup>6</sup>

We reaffirmed this primary biblical truth concerning cities articulated in the *Cape Town Commitment*, but also sought to explore and expand biblical understandings of urbanism with the following reflections.

### **God is a Placemaker**

In the book of Genesis, we learn God created the earth as a good place, and thus a good home for all God's creatures. Creation, then, is a loving gift from the hand of God, and humans—who are a special and unique part of creation being made in God's image—are given the inimitable responsibility to be good and faithful stewards of God's gift of creation.

In Genesis chapter 2 we also learn God intentionally “planted a garden in the east, in Eden” for Adam to dwell. That is, God purposely made a *place* in creation for Adam and his descendants to inhabit and flourish. Some essential truths we learn from the book of Genesis include that God

created people to have a relationship with Him, to live in community and right relationship with others, and to live *in-placed* lives.<sup>7</sup> In other words, *people and places go together!*

This theme is reflected throughout Scripture and is particularly important for the Israelite nation as they enter in to the promised land. Later, even in exile God's command to His people is to settle in the land where they have been led, and to work for its prospering (Jer 29).

The incarnation is also an example of God's place-making desire as he seeks to make a home physically with his people. Finally, in Revelation chapter 22, we see heaven coming to earth, in the form of a garden-city. This realization points to both the importance God places on the physical environment in which we live as well as his desire to place-make with us.

### **God Loves People, Places, and Cities**

Because God created and loves in-placed people, God is concerned about the places where people live their lives—which today are modern forms of farms, villages, towns, and cities situated within, and dependent upon, the larger gift of creation.

The character and quality of these places—which people are responsible for designing and building—have a direct impact on the wellbeing of human families, individuals, and communities. Furthermore, the design of human settlements also affects the integrity and health of the earth's ecosystems, which humans and all other creatures are dependent on for life.

Christians need to be concerned about the design of cities, towns, and villages. Indeed, it is a legitimate, abiding, and imperative concern for Christians because in God's created order people and places are inextricably tied together. Furthermore, because God is concerned that people dwell in places that are fit for human flourishing, so too should Christians be concerned with the suitability of cities for human flourishing and care of creation.

***The world is facing a period of rapid urbanization which is exacerbating serious social, economic, cultural, ecological, and spiritual challenges that must be addressed through integral urban mission in our generation.***

This conviction led to these additional reflections.

### **The Future of Cities**

God's relationship with humanity starts by dwelling together in the Garden of Eden. Following the fall and restoration of all creation by the means of God's love and grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, biblical history culminates when God and humanity once again dwell together in righteousness in a perfect place. That perfect place described in the book of Revelation is a garden-city on a redeemed and renewed earth.

Cities are complex. Their designs and inner-workings can produce many positive things and bless people's lives. At the very same time city realities can grind people up and cause pain and despair. Cities can also cause excessive pollution and transgress the ecological integrity of creation, or they can function within the limits of healthy ecosystems.

Cities will never be perfect places until Christ returns, but in the meantime Christians can pray for, and work toward, designing and making cities that are just, equitable, productive, safe, diverse, healthy, ecologically sustainable, beautiful, enjoyable, etc.— in short, places that are

commensurate with God's love and goodness. In such places families, communities, and individuals can flourish.

*We also recognize that while 50% of the world's population currently lives in cities, with rapid urbanization 70-75% of the world's population will live in urban areas within 20-30 years.* This rapid rate of urban growth creates a fresh, insistent reality that unequivocally calls for an extraordinary response of Christian love and integral mission that is ample and sophisticated enough to respond to the challenges of rapid urbanization and the complexity of the city.

We affirm the great work of many evangelical churches all over the world as they engage with their neighborhoods, villages, towns, and cities being sources of light, life and hope. We recognize, however, that to fully participate in God's reign on earth, and the flourishing of individuals and communities in our generation, we need to go deeper into embracing, understanding and influencing the physical, social, spiritual, and other inner-workings of the city.

### **A CALL TO ACTION – URBAN SHALOM**

Based on these two convictions we call the whole church, in dependence on the Holy Spirit, to respond radically and faithfully to love and care for places—cities, towns, villages, and neighborhoods worldwide, as participants in, and agents of God's shalom through the transforming love and power of Christ. We especially call on evangelical leaders, national evangelical organizations, and all local churches to urgently understand, learn, and act at personal, community, national, and international levels to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city," or what we term urban shalom.

#### **Specifically, we call for:**

- Digging deeper into scripture to learn more truths related to cities from God's perspective and to implement what we learn.
- Applying principles of biblical shalom to develop a vision and practice for urban shalom in integral urban mission. We articulate some principles of urban shalom below.
- Coming closer to God through prayer and other spiritual disciplines so that along with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit we acquire Christian virtues and other spiritual resources to uphold us in our integral urban mission work.
- Supporting, encouraging, and collaborating with our Christian colleagues who are also engaged in integral urban mission work.
- The creation of the common good through seeking to work with our non-Christian colleagues, incorporating the best thinking and practices for city-building from them and other organizations devoted to improving cities. This includes, but is not limited to the work of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, otherwise known as *UN-Habitat*, and the principles of urban design outlined in the *Charter of the New Urbanism*.

## **URBAN SHALOM – SOME PRINCIPLES & PRACTICES**

### **Urban Shalom is a Vision for the City**

We recognize God has a picture of the way life should be, and this picture includes cities. Shalom—which is the picture of the way life should be, best equates with flourishing and is concerned with the wellbeing of the individual in the context of their community. Flourishing includes our basic needs being met; a sense of belonging to the land and to each other; the ability to contribute to the common good; living a life full of meaning; the chance to celebrate; and a growing relationship with God.

Passages such as Isa. 58:6-12, 65:17-25, Jer. 29:7, Lk. 4:16-20, and Rev. 22:1-5 put this concept into the context of cities, showing that they can be places where the young and old are valued, needs met, and each is engaged in meaningful work. These passages also point to the role and responsibility people of faith have in developing cities of shalom.

We affirm the concept of shalom as not only a guide for our involvement in integral urban mission, but it compels us to dialogue and work with non-Christians who are working for the common good in cities.

### **Urban Shalom Invites a Fresh Call to Discipleship**

This vision of shalom cannot simply be another ideology to hold other leaders, government, and people to. As Christians, we ourselves must become people of Shalom, more closely following, joining and participating with the Prince of Shalom. As Christians, we recognize that we have fallen short of what God requires of us in seeking cities of shalom. We have not given our whole hearts and lives to seeing all relationships flourish. We have not spent enough time sacrificially praying and standing in front of the Lord on our cities behalf. We recognize that activities that undermine God's Shalom – excessive consumerism, greed, and competitiveness, to name a few examples – are deeply ingrained in our lives and can only be transformed through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. We ask for God's forgiveness, and seek repentance. We ask God that the church today could become a "sign, instrument and foretaste" (Newbigin, 1989, p.233) of God's coming shalom in the places where we are responsible and have influence. ***Given the times we live in, the call to encounter, follow and join the Risen Jesus afresh as Prince of Shalom in his mission in the world could not be more urgent and important.***

### **Urban Shalom Embraces Economic Equity and Security**

God's Shalom is absent wherever people are not flourishing with God, other people and the earth. We recognize this time in history is one where cities see a growing and scandalous gap between rich and poor. Condominiums with helicopter pads and swimming pools can sit right next to overcrowded slums with open sewers. Disparity destabilizes urban relationships and our life together, dehumanizing people and destroying creation. Jesus came to "bring life and all its fullness," which is a promise for every urban resident, not just the wealthy ones. Where there are powers and evil forces at work perpetuating disparity and economic injustice we call for prayer and active opposition while working for economic equity and security for all people. This includes overcoming disparity in the spheres of business, education, media, government, art and entertainment, families, and religion. Each sphere has unique challenges and opportunities to seek the shalom of the city. ***Given the growing inequalities between rich and poor, and the suffering and instability this is causing the planet, the need to confront the powers causing***

***economic disparity while working for economic justice, equity, and security for all people is vital and urgent.***

### **Urban Shalom Embraces Diversity**

Cities are by their very nature diverse places. Indeed, a city could not function if every person had exactly the same talent, or was the same age and gender. We therefore, welcome diversity in all its complexities, recognizing that Christians can be people of welcome and hospitality, helping neighbors belong together despite differences. We recognize that no individual church or Christian group will be able to respond to all the diverse challenges and opportunities of their city. Strategic alliances, therefore, need to be developed that can: share people, resources, and expertise; identify emerging trends and find responses in pro-active ways; help to advocate for specialist, yet connected responses. ***Given the expanding cultural and religious diversity of our cities, and the needs for human dignity and respect for diversity, the role of shalom-makers and community builders is vital and urgent.***

### **Urban Shalom Cares for Creation**

Creation is a gift from God that has an ecological integrity which supports life. God calls us to be good stewards and caretakers of His creation, thereby enabling us to enjoy the fruits of creation to meet our needs, but not overstepping the ecological limits of creation and destroying the fruitfulness of creation.<sup>8</sup>

The everyday intersection of most people's lives and God's creation is not a pristine forest, a wild river, a tropical reef, or some other unspoiled part of creation, but their home and the city or town it is a part of. Thus, how cities and towns are designed and built; how they function internally (e.g. their transportation systems; their drinking water, waste water, and storm water systems; their energy systems; their solid waste systems; etc.); how they relate to their neighboring rural/agricultural communities; and how they relate to wild places—land, rivers, lakes, oceans, etc.—has a big impact on the health and integrity of creation. For this reason urban shalom requires that urban development uses models and practices of urban land use, city planning, architecture and design, and building that comports with preserving the ecological integrity of God's creation.<sup>9</sup>

### **Urban Shalom Involves Urban Design**

One of the defining characteristics of the urban context is high densities of people sharing a common place. How this sharing of place is negotiated is a crucial challenge for faith and mission. Given the speed of urbanization the burgeoning of quickly established slums and informal settlements, suburban sprawl, and tower block sprawl is understandable, but can undermine human flourishing. The role of imagination, designing, planning, and building places amenable to humans living together in harmony with God and place is therefore a critical one. The Judeo-Christian tradition recognizes that seeing urban shalom happen in cities requires deep prayer, imagination, will, and political engagement coupled with commensurate urban design and development. ***Given the growing density of populations and the various types of stresses this is causing, the need to design, develop, and where necessary retrofit places so they comport with shalom so communities can flourish, is vital and urgent.***<sup>10</sup>

### **Urban Shalom Engages the Public Square**

Christians are explicitly called to be “salt and light” in the world, thus we have a responsibility to contribute to the common good of the city, which requires proactively and constructively engaging in the public square.

We lament that as evangelicals our engagement in the public square has not always come from a place of love, and has not always borne witness to God’s Kingdom or his shalom. It is with regret that we acknowledge the times we have stood in the way of God’s purposes in the world, through ignorance, institutional self-interest, individual divergent priorities, or other motivations.

Because of this recognition we seek to enter the conversation around the future and development of cities with a humility and an openness to truly hear the perspectives and needs of others living in, and served by the city, and where possible to partner on initiatives. We recognize that we don’t have to control initiatives but simply serve, bringing what we have to offer to the table.

We also acknowledge that many people of faith are already in positions of influence within cities, and as leaders we pledge to encourage and strengthen those leaders to be bearers and influencers towards shalom.

### **Urban Shalom Develops Relationships and Collaborations for the Common Good**

Jesus encourages us to seek out people of peace and to work with them for the benefit of the Kingdom. In a rapidly changing world we acknowledge the need to do this like never before. We seek to develop relationships and collaborations with others who may not share the faith but who are open to its values and the possibility of working together toward the common good. This will allow us to connect with their expertise currently outside of our reach and influence its use towards shalom.

We also recognize the value of organizational partnership, and will seek to build connections between churches and local authorities, educational institutions, international organizations and so forth for the positive development of the city. These include, but are not limited to the work of *UN-Habitat*, and the principles of urbanism outlined in the *Charter of the New Urbanism* and accompanying *Canons for Sustainable Architecture and Urban Design*.<sup>11</sup>

### **Associations for the Common Good of People, Places, and Cities**

As people of faith we are not starting from scratch in this endeavor. We have a long history of relevant cultural engagement that reflects Gospel and Kingdom priorities in cities. From starting hospitals to running schools, to service agencies and NGO’s that work all over the world loving, strengthening, and building up the resilience of marginalized people living in cities. We also recognize that people of faith are not the only ones concerned about cities and the experience of people living in them. In October 2016, fifty thousand people gathered in Quito, Ecuador for *UN-Habitat III*. They were city planners, architects, leaders of NGO’s, politicians, support agencies, academics, activists, advocates, UN officials, engineers, climate specialists, all with the aim of creating sustainable and livable cities.

Drawing on the Biblical narrative, including the concept of shalom, as well as our own history and learning, we recognize there are three important extra-biblical international documents that

Christians should be aware of and analyze for the data and information they contain, the practical tools and insights they offer, and the strategic goals they describe regarding cities and their development over the next 20-30 years.

*The City We Need 2.0: Towards a New Urban Paradigm*<sup>12</sup> was put together through a civil society consultation process involving 26 Urban Thinkers Campuses held in various places around the world. The outcome of these conferences and other meetings identified 10 key principles for city development.

**Cities need to:**

1. *Be socially inclusive and engaging*
2. *Be affordable, accessible and equitable*
3. *Be economically vibrant and inclusive*
4. *Be collectively managed and democratically governed*
5. *Foster cohesive territorial development*
6. *Be regenerative and resilient*
7. *Have shared identities and sense of place*
8. *Be well planned, walkable and transit-friendly*
9. *Be safe, healthy and promote wellbeing*
10. *Be places of learning and innovation*

The second document is *Habitat III's New Urban Agenda*.<sup>13</sup> This document was unanimously ratified in Quito by all member nations of the United Nations at the culmination of the conference. It drew heavily on the recommendations of the *City We Need*, as well as expertise from other key stakeholders. We affirm its core vision:

*We share a vision of cities for all, referring to the equal use and enjoyment of cities and human settlements, seeking to promote inclusivity and ensure that all inhabitants, of present and future generations, without discrimination of any kind, are able to inhabit and produce just, safe, healthy, accessible, affordable, resilient, and sustainable cities and human settlements, to foster prosperity and quality of life for all. We note the efforts of some national and local governments to enshrine this vision, referred to as right to the city, in their legislations, political declarations and charters.*

The third, and very practical document, is the Congress for the New Urbanism's *Charter For The New Urbanism* that opens with the following statements that then lead into specific urban design principles. We affirm the Charter's core understanding about cities and principles for urban design.<sup>14</sup>

*We view disinvestment in central cities, the spread of placeless sprawl, increasing separation by race and income, environmental deterioration, loss of agricultural lands and wilderness, and the erosion of society's built heritage as one interrelated community-building challenge.*

*We stand for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities*

*of real neighborhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy.*

*We recognize that physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework.*

*We advocate the restructuring of public policy and development practices to support the following principles: Neighborhoods should be diverse in use and population, communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car, cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accessible public spaces and community institutions, and urban places should be framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice.*

*We represent a broad-based citizenry, composed of public and private sector leaders, community activists, and multidisciplinary professionals. We are committed to reestablishing the relationship between the art of building and the making of community, through citizen-based participatory planning and design.*

*We dedicate ourselves to reclaiming our homes, blocks, streets, parks, neighborhoods, districts, towns, cities, regions, and environment.*

Whilst these documents are holistic in nature, as people of faith we must ask the question; *do they go far enough towards manifesting a Kingdom of God (shalom) agenda in the world?* We proffer this question not out of contentiousness, but sincerely from our commitment to Christian faith as we engage with these globally influential events and documents related to the world's urban future. Where compatibility and common good can be found we will undertake supportive actions implementing the *New Urban Agenda*. And where from a Christian perspective we see deficits in the *New Urban Agenda* we are willing to take divergent actions that we believe are in line with advancing God's vision for urban shalom. We apply the same to the *Charter for the New Urbanism* and the Congress for the New Urbanism that works to advance the design principles of the charter.

## **A CALL TO ACTION IS A CALL TO PRAYER**

A call to action requires more than words and activities. There is a spiritual struggle over the future of the city that we must not shy away from. We especially encourage prayers for:

**Engaging Reality:** Lord, open our eyes, ears and other senses to perceive what is happening in our cities, towns, and villages. Help us to find ways to appropriately respond to the realities we perceive and understand.

**Lamenting Grief:** Lord, help us feel deeply what you feel about the happenings in our cities, towns, and villages. We especially pray for forgiveness where we have been responsible for, or benefited from, holding others back from flourishing in our cities, towns, and villages.

**Finding Hope:** Lord, our hope is in you and the redemption of all things in Christ (Col. 1:15-19). Help us to be your agents of shalom in cities, and for cities. May we be fully empowered for this work by your Holy Spirit, the truth of your Word, the vision of your Kingdom on earth, and the assurance of Jesus' return that will consummate the reconciliation and redemption of all creation, including cities, that was initiated with Jesus' resurrection victory over sin and death.

**Celebrating Victories:** Lord, help us to rejoice and celebrate the breakthroughs and victories—big and small, that will be won along the way as we take up this call to action for urban shalom.

***Agreed together by the participants of the Gospel and Future of Cities Summit, Quito, Ecuador, October 16, 2016.***

## NOTES:

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1. Formally the Urban Shalom Project
2. To review the *Cape Town Commitment* go to:  
<https://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment>
3. To review the *Creation Care and the Gospel: Call to Action* statement go to:  
<http://www.weacreationcare.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Call-To-Action-Word-Doc.pdf>
4. Cape Town Commitment II.D.4.
5. The objectives of *Habitat III* were to “secure renewed political commitment for sustainable urban development, assess accomplishments to date, address poverty, and identify and address new and emerging challenges” and to produce a “concise, focused, forward-looking, and action-oriented outcome document.” The document that was produced through the *Habitat III* process, and signed by all the member governments of the United Nations, is entitled *The New Urban Agenda*.
6. For convenience sake, we will refer to the range of human settlements— cities, towns, villages, etc., simply as “the city.” For example, when we affirm that “God loves the city,” what we really mean is God loves not just cities, but all variety of places—cities, towns, villages, etc., that people design and build for human settlements.
7. To learn more, refer to Craig G. Bartholomew’s *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (2011), chapter one entitled A Theology of Place in Genesis 1-3.
8. For more in-depth information about the principles of creation care this call to action upholds and supports go to: <http://www.weacreationcare.org/milestone-wea-statements-on-creation-care/>
9. The *Charter for the New Urbanism* and accompanying *Canons of Sustainable Architecture and Urbanism* articulate principles and practices that can be used to design and build places that care for creation. To read these documents go to: <https://www.cnu.org/who-we-are/charter-new-urbanism>
10. The critical relationship between urban shalom and urban design applies not only to care of creation, but many other aspects of shalom in the city. Thus, the *Charter for the New Urbanism* and accompanying *Canons of Sustainable Architecture and Urbanism* apply practically to this point too. To read these documents go to this link: <https://www.cnu.org/who-we-are/charter-new-urbanism>
11. To read *The Charter for the New Urbanism* and the accompanying *Canons of Sustainable Architecture and Urbanism* go to: <https://www.cnu.org/who-we-are/charter-new-urbanism>
12. To review *The City We Need 2.0* go to:  
<http://www.worldurbancampaign.org/sites/default/files/documents/tcwn2en.pdf>
13. To review *The New Urban Agenda* go to: <http://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/New-Urban-Agenda-GA-Adopted-68th-Plenary-N1646655-E.pdf>
14. To read *The Charter for the New Urbanism* and the accompanying *Canons of Sustainable Architecture and Urbanism* go to: <https://www.cnu.org/who-we-are/charter-new-urbanism>.