

Comparative Analysis:  
**Charter of Athens<sup>i</sup> and Charter of the New Urbanism<sup>ii</sup>**

**By** Dodds, Mathew  
**For** URBS 300 | Silvano De la Llata

Concordia University

Feb-20-2019

---

<sup>i</sup> *La Charte d'Athenes Paris* (1933), CIAM, Paris.

<sup>ii</sup> *Charter of the New Urbanism* (1963), CNU, Washington.

## Introduction

These two Charters, *The Charter of Athens* and *The Charter of the New Urbanism*, are a means to communicate two respective platforms - sought to be followed by personnel concerned with city planning. Although these charters are different than each other in terms of advice or guideline(s), they do address the same themes. The following tables outline the differences between the charters based on particular themes of city planning.

	<b>Charter of Athens</b>	<b>Charter of the New Urbanism</b>
Date published	1933	1996
Authors	Congress Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM)	Congress of the New Urbanism (CNU)
Philosophy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Modernism</i><sup>iii</sup> is the base archetype of this Charter. CIAM were modern architects trying to superimpose their ideas into city planning theory.</li> <li>▪ The individual and the community are opposing forces that should be balanced by the work of urbanism.</li> <li>▪ The environment guides the individual.</li> <li>▪ Cities should be developed with the latest technology.</li> <li>▪ Cities are to “satisfy the basic biological and physiological needs of their inhabitants”<sup>iv</sup>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Postmodernism</i><sup>v</sup> as argued by Hirt<sup>vi</sup> is the paradigm this charter applies to, although not explicitly stated by the CNU.</li> <li>▪ To integrate <i>smart growth</i> and <i>new urbanism</i> into a platform.</li> <li>▪ Diversity as a central ideal for city planning and infrastructure.</li> <li>▪ Urban planning can be a tool to promote economic, social, and environmental sustainability.</li> <li>▪ As a wave of “reclamation”<sup>vii</sup> - perhaps a statement in the charter that indirectly contests <i>modernism</i>; will be discussed later.</li> </ul>
Responds to...	The Athens Charter responds to the urban chaos that CIAM and Le Corbusier observed during the early 19 <sup>th</sup> century. Phenomena like the plague, wars, disease and poverty were problems that CIAM were trying to address with the Charter.	The Charter of the New Urbanism responds to urban sprawl, social inequalities, environmental issues: including degradation and loss of farmlands, and the loss of heritage. This charter is trying to solve these problems.

<sup>iii</sup> Modernism was an avant garde movement from 1920- in which the city is objectified as a means for the state to govern. “Planning and the Modern/Postmodern Debate”, *Barry Goodchild*, *The Town Planning Review* v. 61 no. 2 (1990), Liverpool University Press, 126.

<sup>iv</sup> *La Charte d'Athenes Paris* (1933), CIAM, Paris, #71.

<sup>v</sup> *Postmodernism* is a response to modernism that acts as a cultural paradigm and epistemology for arts and practice. “Premodern, Modern, Postmodern?” *Sonia Hirt*, *Journal of Planning History* vol. 8 no. 3 (2009), Virginia Polytechnique, 250.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*, 248.

<sup>vii</sup> *Charter of the New Urbanism* (1963), CNU, Washington, 2.

## Thematic Breakdown

<i>On...</i>	<b>Charter of Athens</b>	<b>Charter of the New Urbanism</b>
The city region	The city is a separate regional entity from all else.	The city region is a part of the contemporary world.
Residencies	An emphasis on high rise apartments, away from rail lines, with modern building techniques.	Encourages different types of residential buildings, with appropriate proximity to rail.
Pedestrians	Pedestrian routes should be separate from vehicular routes.	Roads should consider both pedestrian and vehicle traffic.
Suburbs	Suburbs should be connected to the city via highways such that they are still a part of the metropolis.	Suburbs are discouraged, however, suggested to promote themselves as sustaining towns along urban edges.
Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Importance of modern, new, architecture and technology.</li> <li>▪ Great density, with open space between buildings.</li> <li>▪ The nature and topography should be integrated into design as separate actors in the art of interacting with human behaviour; not dictating the style, method, size, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ No emphasis on new technology or any paradigm.</li> <li>▪ Multi-use complexes are recommended.</li> <li>▪ Planning and design should be organic, adaptive, and participatory.</li> <li>▪ The nature and topography should be primarily accounted for when designing buildings and civic space in said area.</li> </ul>
Building Height	High rise and high-density buildings are almost necessary to free up space for roads and civic space.	No designation of building height(s).
Natural Account	The city should incorporate nature for its beauty which can be interpreted as a commodification of nature.	Nature should be taken into consideration, in regard to protecting the environment. This is contrary to commodification.
Heritage	Focused on preserving “fine” <sup>viii</sup> architecture. Planners can preserve early-culture buildings if it is in the public’s interest.	No direct guidelines for preservation. The encouragement for heritage is equivocate, although still prevalent.
Transportation	High-speed automobiles are prioritized, which effects road hierarchies, road design, and pedestrian life.	Transit is highly prioritized, along with vehicles and pedestrians. There is no dramatization of one or the other.

<sup>viii</sup> *La Charte d'Athenes Paris* (1933), CIAM, Paris, #65.

## Discussion

These tables are not in any particular weighted order. They are organized based on their order of occurrence in the charters. I do believe some are more important than others. In this discussion I will discern which themes are the most important.

Although one might assume or even argue that *philosophy* is the most important subject matter in this comparison table, it is not. That is because this table, for the majority, only highlights the philosophy as stated by the Congresses/Authors of the charters – which in both cases are indirect and ambiguous. Thus, a critical objective interpretation of the philosophy and intention of these charters must be discussed. To do this one has to observe that which is *directly* stated in the charters (subsequently, outlined in the above tables). The most important theme, therefore, is *Design* – which is where both charters explicitly detail their ambitions that would influence human behaviour. The influence of urbanism on human behaviour is the underlying *why* question of each charter and their ideas.

## Liberty

The loudest contention of human behaviour (between the two charters) is an urban dialect of the liberty debate; it underlies the philosophical differentiation between the Athens Charter and New Urbanism. The liberty debate in pure form is as follows: *positive liberty*, the maximization of opportunity for the individual to self-actualize, dichotomizes with *negative liberty*, the maximization of options/routes/choices for the individual. The urban dialect of this dichotomy is a matter of assuming what type of liberty the individual should get (in the city, but not limited to). The charter of Athens assumes that *positive liberty* should be sought after – such that urban dwellers can self-actualize or work towards self-actualization. The Charter of the New Urbanism assumes *negative liberty* should be sought after – such that urban dwellers have the most choices/routes/options. Examples are prevalent in the *Design, Transportation, and Responds to...* themes (see tables 1 and 2 above).

In the charter of Athens, CIAM demonstrated how they favour *positive liberty*. That is, by refraining from adaptation in design, and creating monotonous answers, one-size-fits-all solutions, to impose upon society. CIAM did this because they believed they were liberating people of their suffering. They were imposing *positive liberty* because they believed their approach to urbanism was going to help citizens evolve. This is also evident in their transportation suggestions, as they favour only vehicles; their emphasis on strictly modern building design, as it tries to solve human issues; and their response to chaos, as a means to create peace. Unfortunately, imposing *positive liberty* upon a city is blatantly problematic as it promulgates the vision of the imposer.<sup>ix</sup>

In the Charter of the New Urbanism, *negative liberty* is assumed. This is clear in CNU's commitment to: adaptability, diversity, acceptance, and options, as found in their recommendations for transportation, design, housing, and heritage. The essence of their message in promoting mixed-used buildings and communities is an application of *negative liberty*. The charter imposes answers that leave room for choices, adaptation, and change – and every point in the above tables reflect this. They believe, freedom in the city is having options.

---

<sup>ix</sup> CIAM does not know what people need, but by imposing this charter, they are telling people what they need.

# Implications of the Charters

## Charter of Athens

The Charter of Athens is stringent in style and invokes the humdrum of urban life. It has multiple forces in doing so. By promoting high-rise apartments, they are creating high degrees of dwelling isolation from public life. By disfavoured pedestrians and favouring vehicles, they are suggesting that people should be isolated in their own cars. By enforcing one particular building style, cities feel placeless and cold. CIAM's application of design implicate the loss of the individual within the urban landscape. The political implications are fascist in nature. As discussed earlier, by imposing their vision upon society they are reducing the options of the individual. Another issue in the Charter is its proclamation of the four keys to urban planning: dwelling, work, recreation, and transportation.<sup>x</sup> This implies that cities can become *good* by simply serving these four keys. It is obvious that cities have much more concerning them than just these four keys – thus planning should be more complex than that. This charter reinforces gender inequalities by separating work from home, which is deliberately ignorant of the gendered roles in home economics. He reinforces male superiority by promoting workshops into high-end real estate in the city core<sup>xi</sup> – during this time workshops were generally run by men. This charter continuously promotes the demolition of slums. CIAM detests slums. This ignorance for place reflects CIAM's romanticizing of cleanliness, and disregard for culture. Their style is invasive and suggests city should be overhauled. In totality, this charter is dangerous as it implies the loss of genuine city growth and gives excessive power to a small elite.

## Charter of the New Urbanism

The Charter of the New Urbanism is subject to ample criticism – especially surrounding the basis of the charter and the ambiguous rhetoric. The basis of the charter is that it should be a platform of adaption and diversity. That in itself is paradoxical because it tries to articulate what

---

<sup>x</sup> *La Charte d'Athenes Paris* (1933), CIAM, Paris, #71.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid*, #49.

that adaption and diversity is and should be. Adaption and diversity in their truest forms should avoid as much pre-emptive articulation, so as to not spoil the integrity of it. The charter contradicts itself in this regard. On economics, this charter is reinforcing production-consumption relationships by creating mixed-used plots and areas. It keeps the purchaser closer to the product - this is a notion of neoliberalism meant to stimulate the economy. The charter is very limited. If one were to tackle the all of the planning issues of a city using this charter, they would find themselves out of resources. It does not cover a very wide subject range. Because of that, there are social implications. Certain groups of people are not accounted for – minorities and lower income brackets namely. The charter is guilty of being a manifesto of some sort. Because of this, public participation seems to be less apparent in terms of decision making. Although the charter provides the individual with options, are the individuals in charge of which options they get? The charter does not include very many routes for the people to democratically assemble and make decisions – thus, like the Athens charter, the fear of an elitist power is valid. This charter is less invasive, and less disastrous than the Athens charter – but it still has many issues.

## **Charter Examples**

Importantly, the following observations are of my own, as I've travelled and/or lived in each of these cities. When possible, my observations are combined with academic research which is cited below. The cities chosen are not in their *entirety* fruitions of each charter - but have many aspects exemplifying enough of the charter to draw a potential connection of influence. If one were to investigate the city's relationship with the charter further, they should start by discerning the architects and planners responsible for the listed phenomena in this report.

# The Fruition of the Charter of Athens

*This section will provide two examples of communities or cities that demonstrate the practices suggested by the Charter of Athens. In bullet points I will explain the distinctive qualities that exemplify the charter.*

## Abu Dhabi



<https://www.mckinsey.com/middle-east/abu-dhabi>

- Has an extremely high-density of buildings in the central core. There is very little unused space.
- Has a notable amount of high-rise buildings, some amongst the tallest in the world.
- Buildings are modern and technologically advanced.
- Has greenbelts along express ways and main traffic routes in the core of the city.
- Prioritizes vehicle traffic by not having rapid transit.
- Commodifies natural features by developing high class lots along waterfronts.
- Has industrial zoning separate from residential areas and connected with robust highways.
- Has ratified levels of 'on' and 'off' ramps, prevalent along the highways and express routes.
- Has monuments in propinquity to open civic space.

Abu Dhabi has embraced modernism and embodies many of CIAM's values throughout the city streets. The feeling of the city is unfriendly and social interaction is placed unnaturally upon the urban landscapes. The people are forced to find oxymoronic interaction by recreating pseudo public space in the private infrastructure, like shopping malls.



# Santiago de Chile



<https://www.travelandleisure.com/trip-ideas/santiago-spots-to-visit>

- Saw a redevelopment of the Alameda (the main road) to serve cars instead of streetcars<sup>xii</sup>.
- Expressways were created underground to accommodate more vehicular traffic.
- High rises rapidly replaced *campamentos*<sup>xiii</sup> (equivalent to slums) during the Pinochet regime and after.
- Monuments are positioned and preserved with vast civic space surrounding them.
- Industrial zones are separated.
- Historically was a response to chaos caused by the Allende regime, and the coup d'état.
- Pinochet famously tried to fix and clean the city, earning the name 'Modern Miracle' for Santiago<sup>xiv</sup>.
- De-slumification took place everywhere in the *pobladores*<sup>xv</sup>.
- The city uses the mountains as a vista.

Santiago embraced modernism during different eras. First, during the Allende regime when Allende implemented social housing projects. Then, during the Pinochet regime when the above aspects of the charter of Athens were implemented. The result is a city that has many pockets of modernity throughout.

---

<sup>xii</sup> Murphy, "For a Proper Home", (Pittsburgh University Press, 2014), 165.

<sup>xiii</sup> Matias Garreton, "Ch 3" in *Neoliberalism and Urban Development in Latin America* (Routledge 2018), 43

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xv</sup> Miguel A. Perez, "Becoming Political Subjects in the City's Peripheries" *UC Berkeley* (2016), 37.

# The Fruition of the Charter of the New Urbanism

*This section will be just as the former section was, except of the Charter of the New Urbanism.*

## Olympic Village, Vancouver BC

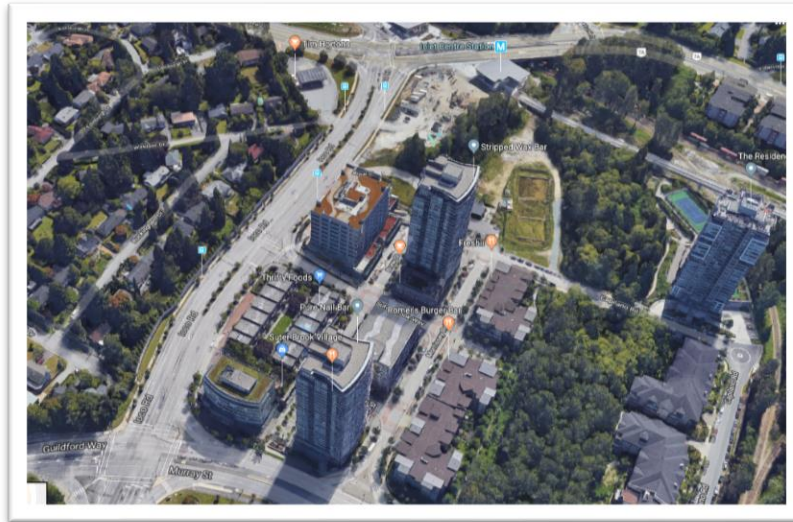


*Recollective Consulting*

- Has mixed used buildings throughout the area
- Organically wraps around the coast line
- Park space within walking distance of all residences
- Very pedestrian friendly with large walkways
- Public services and daily activities within proximity
- Walking distance to various Skytrain stations
- The neighbourhood is dense and compact
- Was a revitalization of parking and industrial lots

The most notable impression of the CNU's doctrine is the fabrication of the Olympic Village to be a perfect neighbourhood. It was all built at one time for the 2010 Olympics. Although it follows the charters ideals, as listed above, it lacks a sense of place. The area feels like a forced, phony utopia. Even the green grass in front of the residences is artificial turf.

## Inlet Centre, Port Moody, BC



*Google Maps*

- Built to accommodate people along the new evergreen Skytrain line
- Solely mixed used buildings
- Has various types of architecture within the area
- Some buildings reflect the local area with wood accents
- Preserves heritage with a statue of Moody in the middle
- Very walkable with large side walks
- Bike lines provide more options for travel
- Within walking distance to Port Moody recreation centres and parks
- High density residences in a compact plan
- Ample greenspace in propinquity to the residences

Inlet centre is a newly developed neighbourhood that is within minutes from the evergreen Skytrain line. The area follows the CNU's doctrine very closely with the above traits. What lacks in this area is a natural feeling of locality, which reflects some of the issues of the Charter of the new Urbanism pertaining to superimposing a standard.

## Conclusion

These two charters – The Charter Athens and The Charter of the new Urbanism – have various implications that affect society and the individual. As discussed in this paper, the charters should be critiqued on their manner of practice. That is, the charters do not value the organic nature of urban-human growth. The Athens charter disregards the individual's choice entirely by telling people how to live. The Charter of the New Urbanism, although seemingly providing more options for the individual, still lacks participation in decision making. They both pose a question of power. What happens when the city planner has so much control over how the individual lives? This question was answered in the above examples. In Abu Dhabi and Santiago, people feel less individually important, and have less means to be unique. The urban landscape feels intimidating and unwelcoming. In Vancouver's Olympic Village and Port Moody's Inlet Centre, people still have less say in the community's development, but they do have more options in their day-to-day life – creating a feeling of adequacy that lacks flourishment.

This study has looked at the key differences, the philosophical debate, the social implications, and key examples of these two charters. Even as these two charters are heavily criticized every day, their influence does not fail to impact today's urban world.

## Works Cited

Congress for the New Urbanism. 1996. *Charter of the New Urbanism*. Washington DC: CNU.

Congress Internationaux d'Architecture moderne (CIAM). 1933. "La Charte d'Athenes or The Athens Charter." Paris.

Goodchild, Barry. 1990. "Planning and the Modern/Postmodern Debate." *The Town Planning Review* (Liverpool University Press) 61 (2): 119-137.

Murphy, Edward. 2014. *For a Proper Home: Housing Rights in the Margins of Urban Chile, 1960-2010*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Routledge. 2018. *Neoliberalism and Urban Development in Latin America: The Case of Santiago*. New York: Taylor & Francis Group.