

# I · N · T · B · A · U

International Network for Traditional Building, Architecture & Urbanism  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA CHAPTER

April 6, 2009

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

RE: Building a sustainable future in the current economic crisis: A conflict, or an opportunity?

We applaud your recent call for tough choices by the citizens of the United States to get our house in order for the long term. Surely no long-term goal is more important than finding smarter, more sustainable ways to live, in more efficient and resilient neighborhoods, cities and towns. As you are aware, many practicing architects, academics, civic leaders and NGOs are working toward the goal of walkable neighborhoods, main street revitalization, historic preservation and new urbanism. We believe our members and allies can help to develop important opportunities during this period to lay the foundation for America's future economic sustainability -- and in particular, to respond to the grave threat of climate change.

We believe this is a more urgent agenda than many recognize. Recent research has shown clearly that the way we build our cities and towns has a powerful effect on carbon emissions and climate change.<sup>1</sup> Sprawling, fragmented suburbs generate much greater emissions per capita than compact, walkable, livable cities and towns. A combination of smart development, infill, retrofit, cogeneration and building-scale efficiencies could have an enormous impact on energy and emissions in a sector that contributes as much as 70% of energy consumption in United States.

The research shows that transportation is only part of the story. We must also consider the contributions of infrastructure construction and maintenance, operating energy for lighting and pumping, transmission losses, loss of so-called ecosystem services like water purification, loss of opportunity for district power and cogeneration, albedo and heat island effects, so-called induced demand, and the types and sizes of dwellings and other buildings.

Beyond the urgent challenge of climate change, we also know that urban form and quality have an important impact on human health. Close proximity between working, school and living is an important mix that promotes health and reduces travel time. By contrast, evidence shows that sprawling areas have markedly higher rates of asthma, obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other serious illnesses. This only compounds the already critical issue of rising health care costs.

There are other serious impacts and hidden costs. Long-term infrastructure operating and maintenance costs are likely to grow significantly per person. The replacement cost of lost "ecosystem services" like water purification will have to be paid increasingly by citizens. As fuel costs rise with oil

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<sup>1</sup> For example, one of us recently presented a survey research paper at the IARU International Scientific Congress on Climate Change at Copenhagen, with a colleague from the IPCC. That paper is available on the web at [www.tectics.com/IARU.htm](http://www.tectics.com/IARU.htm).

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depletion, the costs of commuting can become an intolerable burden for many families – a problem that contributed to the wave of mortgage defaults at the beginning of the current economic crisis.

Thus it appears there is an important connection to be developed between the stimulus spending for infrastructure, the challenge of climate change, and the development of sustainable prosperity through a wiser kind of low-carbon economy. Your administration has already identified this link and we are deeply appreciative of that recognition.

Yet issues related to urban planning and architecture are seen as disconnected from other pressing issues. It is not easy to understand the importance of these factors, because they are systemic and slow to change; but for that very reason they are also persistent, and have a powerful cumulative effect. They shape our future prosperity and well-being in profound ways. Therefore we believe we must all do a better job understanding and managing the growth of our built environment - what Jane Jacobs memorably called “the kind of problem a city is.” Change on such a large scale is difficult, but that is why it needs to come from the top – from the President - and at the same time it has to grow bottom-up from the grassroots level. We stand ready to assist in that process.

We are pleased to note that the First Lady has started work on an organic garden at the White House. This is a commendable example of the kind of transition to more sustainable neighborhood practices that we will have to emulate on a much larger scale in every small town and city. We will need more durable, resilient buildings and neighborhoods that support walkability and livability, and help to attract residents to a high-quality, low-carbon lifestyle. We need to show that more sustainable living can also be better living, with greater long-term prosperity and a higher quality of life.

As stimulus spending goes forward, a particularly strong return can come from investment in the rehabilitation of older buildings, which brings local jobs and energizes well-located existing neighborhoods that typically have lower emissions and costs. We believe we can learn much from these buildings for revitalization and for new construction as well -- in their resilience, their adaptability, their beauty, and their time-proven sustainability.

We note that there are important implications for international policy as well. The United States is still a major exporter of its lifestyle to the developing world. When we get our own house in order, we can leverage the effect of that to other countries around the world, with an even more significant improvement in greenhouse gas emissions. Conversely, if we do not get our house in order, that has a multiplier effect in other countries, with potentially grave results for worldwide trends over the next century. Nor are we in a position to ask other nations to make changes we have not made ourselves.

We therefore suggest the following priorities for national action on this topic:

Short-term goals:

- 1) Continue to develop measurement criteria and incentives to guide stimulus spending, with extra incentives for lower carbon scores, and penalties for higher scores, using broad metrics (not just transportation). Target stimulus spending for pilot projects that create awareness of the benefits of walkable neighborhood planning and sustainable neighborhood lifestyles.
- 2) Prioritize additional projects that improve and build upon existing low-carbon areas and assets, particularly historic and transit-served areas.
- 3) Prioritize the retrofit and conservation of the best existing buildings and neighborhoods.
- 4) Continue funding for large-scale public transportation projects, but tied closely to smarter regional development patterns.

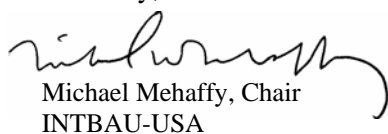
- 5) Develop collaborative support for innovative new state programs, such as the implementation of California's landmark AB32 and SB375 laws.
- 6) Establish a watchdog office that polices stimulus spending and other Federal policy, and eliminates hidden incentives for sprawl.

Longer-term goals:

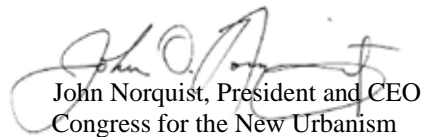
- 1) Fund more aggressive research into the comparative study of urban forms and their benefits, particularly with regard to climate change, human health and economic sustainability.
- 2) Fund research and development of new tools and strategies to modify and retrofit cities and towns with low-carbon systems, with the aim of carbon reduction and economic development.
- 3) Fund the study and research of the value of humane and sustainable place making which respects local culture, heritage, ecology and economy.
- 4) Fund research to identify the hidden costs of sprawl, and strategies to price these real costs.
- 5) Implement new tools to finance and incentivize low-carbon neighborhood development, such as pricing signals, credits, urban codes, certifications, and related resources.
- 6) Encourage more demonstration projects that show that a lower-carbon lifestyle can actually be more enjoyable. Develop policies that acknowledge that beautiful places are more likely to be lived in, loved, cared for, and sustained over time.

Like you, Sir, we believe this time of crisis is also a time of opportunity – to move beyond expedient, business-as-usual solutions that will likely set the stage for yet another even larger crisis, and instead to lay the foundation of a more sustainable economic prosperity. It is urgent therefore that we recognize and adopt the transformational policies and practices that will be needed. In this challenge, we believe it is clearer than ever that the form and quality of our infrastructure, our urbanism and architecture will be critical, and we must make transformational changes now. We and our members and allies stand ready to assist in whatever way, including working with your staff as desired.

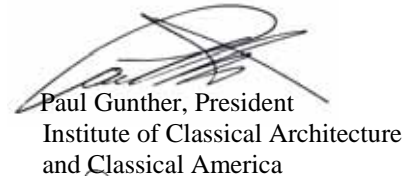
Sincerely,



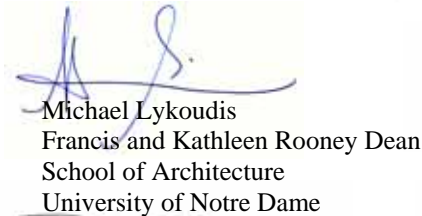
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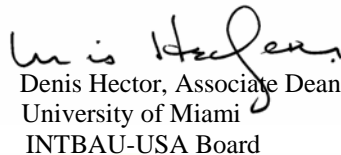
John Norquist, President and CEO  
Congress for the New Urbanism



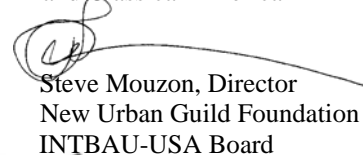
Paul Gunther, President  
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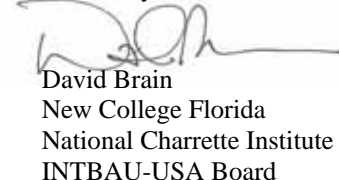
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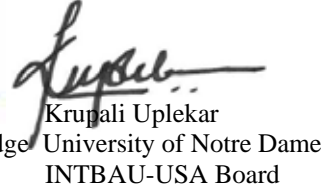
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New Urban Guild Foundation  
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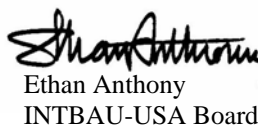
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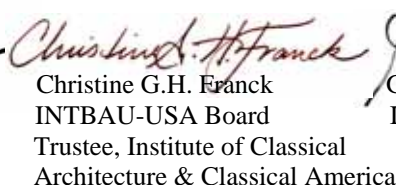
Kyriakos Pontikis  
California State University Northridge  
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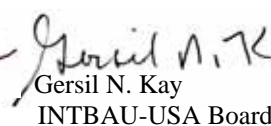
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