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Baltimore and Seattle: Cities on the Edge



These forum pages are produced under an agreement between the Design History Foundation and the American Institute of Architects. AIA's Committee on Design program last year included meetings in Baltimore and Seattle, covered in this article. For information about membership and upcoming programs, call 800-242-3837 or visit www.e-architect.com/pia/cod.

The work of the American city today is the work of manufacturing the experience of city life. At least, that's my take on two recent, fascinating visits to Baltimore and Seattle. Both cities are very different from the city of production, the city of finance or the city of government. But they're not, maybe, so different from cities of the more distant past. In eighteenth-century London, Samuel Johnson and his circle spent a lot of time talking in coffee houses. "There are two Starbucks on this block," one of our guides informed us, "which is a rather low density for Seattle."

After the interregnum of the Industrial Revolution, we are seeing a return to the idea of the city as a place where we go to seek social and cultural exchange as members of a community. One hears now of people who work in, say, Silicon Valley and take a weekend hotel room in downtown San Francisco to "have a life." In the past, we worked in the city and went to the country to recreate. Today, we often work in the burbs and head downtown for recreation. It's a major flip-flop.

What kind of urban recreation do we pursue? Ballparks, festival marketplaces, waterfronts, art museums, concert halls, sidewalk cafes. We are not always that intensely focused, though, on what we are ostensibly seeing. When I was young and went to the ballpark, half the fans had their ballpoints out, keeping score in their programs. At games in Baltimore and Seattle, I saw not a single person doing that. In the crowded art museums, the visitors often seem only vaguely aware of the art.

We really seek something else: to experience ourselves as members of a public. Isolated behind the screens of our cars and televisions, we are starved for that lost experience. And publicness is the very essence of city life. The coffee and food, the base paths and Van Goghs, the music and shopping, are not so important in themselves. They are the game boards around which we

The American Institute of Architects
Committee on Design

Robert Campbell, FAIA

gather. Feeling that we're in public, that there is such a thing as a public: that's the point.

The two visits, Baltimore in April and Seattle in July, were undertaken by the American Institute of Architects Committee on Design, chaired this year by Henry (Dusty) Reeder, FAIA, of Cambridge. Each year, the committee investigates two or more cities, studying their architecture and urban design by means of tours, lectures and seminars. Baltimore and Seattle are waterfront cities, of course, and Reeder titled his two-city conference "The City at the Edge." By this he meant not only the physical edge against the water but also the "edge of failure" against the inner city. Both city visits were immensely fruitful.

The first thing one noticed was the water itself, and how different it felt in the two cities. Baltimore's harbor, when viewed on a map, looks like a section through a birth canal. No surprise that it's called the Inner Harbor: there's a unique inwardness to the water here. In Seattle, even though the city isn't directly on the ocean, the harbor is perceived as an edge, a periphery. When you're there, you feel you're looking outward to the world.

But why this obsession with water, anyway? Why are Americans of this era mesmerized by urban waterfronts? Aside from the obvious fact that waterfronts are newly available, thanks to the decline of industry, two explanations come to mind. One: the sheet of water establishes a connection with the rest of the world. Put your finger in the water and you're touching an apprehensible substance that also touches Rotterdam and Hong Kong. Water becomes a metaphor for globalization. Two: water is sensual. It smells of salt and wind; it rustles and crashes with sound; it is cold and wet. In a world in which, to an amazing degree, sensual experience of the environment has given way to the mediated, abstracted experience of the digital monitor, we reach out in desperation for something palpable.



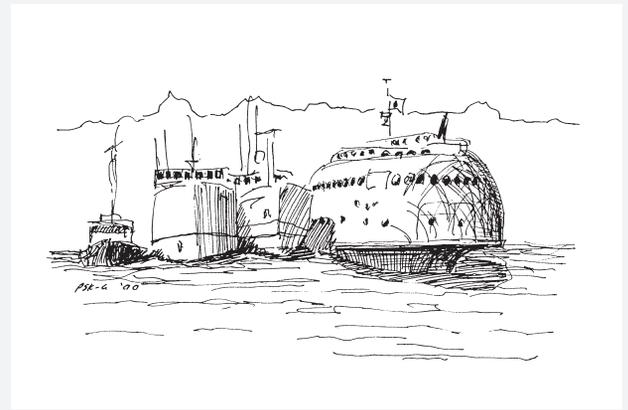
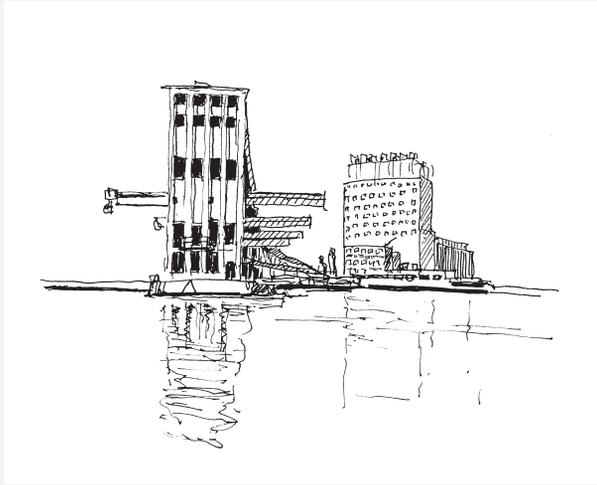
The Baltimore (above) and Seattle (below) waterfronts have significantly different configurations. Baltimore's Inner Harbor is like a room, enclosed by the city, while Puget Sound provides a great open edge for Seattle. Photos courtesy American Institute of Architects

That sense of a need for material reality also came up when we toured the former factories and warehouses on Baltimore's harbor, many of which are now being converted to house the "dot-coms" of today. Bill Struever, who is turning a former Procter and Gamble plant (now "Tide Point") into 800,000 square feet of leasable dot-com space, told us that what the young entrepreneurs desire is something called "cool space." They find it in the massive brick, timber and steel of the old buildings, not in the slick curtain-wall packages of the recent past. Cool space is perceived as not mediated: raw, real, physical, material—everything, in fact, that the technology of the dot-com world is not. Cool space hasn't been tailored to your needs. You feel as if you have discovered it yourself and are camping out in it. It speaks of your individual initiative and informality, not of a developer's standard program.

Impressive as they were, the dot-coms along the harbor—the "digital harbor," as it's now being

called—proved to be, disappointingly, a handsome crust on an often decaying city. Another kind of crust was Fells Point, a lovely restored waterfront neighborhood that proved, on inspection, to be only a few blocks deep. Perhaps as visitors we exaggerated, but our sense of a city divided, front-stage and backstage, water-music and blues, was strong.

I was reminded of Fells Point when one speaker, Charles Duff, who rehabs old neighborhoods, talked of the generic rise and fall of American fad neighborhoods—some newly built, some restored—in which a whole population moves in all at once and maybe, thirty or forty years later, disappears all at once too. You couldn't help thinking, in that connection, of how rootless the dot-coms are. Unlike the great shipping and manufacturing establishments that preceded them, they have no investment in physical plant. With the click of a mouse, they can drop their cool space into the recycle bin.



Two views from Baltimore Harbor
 Sketches by Phillip Kennedy-Grant

Does the amazing renovation of the harbor mean that Baltimore is coming back? Or is energy merely being displaced from one part of town to another? It's easy to be pessimistic. Jay Brodie, FAIA, of the Baltimore Development Corporation, however, spoke persuasively of two demographic trends that may fuel the urban revival for a long time to come. These were, first, a growing pool of empty nesters, as people live longer and healthier lives, and second, a large population of younger people who delay having children. Both groups gravitate to the city. Other forces favoring the city, Brodie said, are the "Atlanta effect" of unacceptably long commutes and the appeal of funky old buildings to people raised in the "boring" suburbs.

Seattle, of course, was very different. This is a wealthy city trying to manage success, rather than stimulate it. Seattle is taking a deeply responsible position that I wish would be adopted by other cities. This is the understanding that the only solution to suburban sprawl is the densification of cities. Either we grow across our farms and forests, or we grow inside our cities.

John Rahaim, the city's urban design chief, told us without panic that Seattle expects to accommodate 1.5 million people—a fifty per cent increase—in the near future. It plans to accomplish that on only thirty per cent of its land, so as

to leave single-family neighborhoods untouched. Architect and writer Mark Hinshaw, AIA spoke of new mixed-use towers in Seattle with retail on the ground floor, offices above and housing above that. The perfect mix, you'd think, for an American downtown, yet very rare.

The Seattle waterfront is a lesson in mixed-use and the vitality it brings, with heavy and light industry, housing, recreation, culture, shopping and much else jammed in an unembarrassed way into the same precinct—very different from the digital and tourist monocultures of Baltimore's harbor. Deliberately grungy Pike Place Market, and even the ugly automobile viaduct, project a sense of comparatively unfaked reality. Seattle's working harbor still hosts 1,000 ships a year, second on the West coast only to Long Beach.

But Mayor Paul Schell, Hon. AIA, in the wrap-up panel, while endorsing the goals of high density and mixed use, lamented his lack of power to implement them. As a metaphor for the weakness and dispersion of government, he noted that a Chinook salmon must swim through thirty-six jurisdictions to reach its spawning ground. "There is," he said, "no constituency for change in Seattle."

In both cities, we saw wonders. I was delighted by the "Boathouse," the office and studio of glass sculptor Dale Chihuly, a wood pier on a lake filled

with idiosyncratic moves: shelves of old boys' novels used as decor in a bathroom, school lunchboxes as a frieze along a corridor, a lap pool with a colored glass bottom, an eighty-eight-foot table carved from a single piece of wood. Steven Holl's St. Ignatius Chapel at the University of Seattle was a marvel of sculpted light; as one speaker pointed out, it "helped the public understand that buildings can be more than enclosure." Frank Gehry's Experience Music Center, a rock museum, must be making that point too, although the architecture is little more than a shapeless colored tent. At the Seattle Symphony's new Benaroya Hall, the block-length lobby along Third Street was a superbly ambiguous space, functioning as both lobby and covered sidewalk, open all day to the public with a Starbucks to attract passersby.

Both cities boasted impressive new ballparks and both parks, like the game itself, were deeply nostalgic. Baltimore's recalled the age of massive masonry, Seattle's that of intricate erector-set steel. Both parks offered an important lesson: the right place for a ballpark is a disinvested neighborhood within walking distance of downtown. Seattle and Baltimore fans can walk to the park after work, stopping for a drink or a meal before or after the game and thus revitalizing a neighborhood. In a stroke of urban design genius, Baltimoreans preserved an enormous brick warehouse parallel to the ballpark and created a street between the two. The street is pedestrian at game time; you pass through it to enter the park, and it becomes a vital center of public life, rather like that block-long lobby in Seattle.

Much that we saw in these cities—the nostalgic ballparks, the garage-rock esthetic of the "cool space" dot-coms, even St. Ignatius Chapel (where, we were told, Holl hoped "everything would be made by hand") suggested that we are now in the midst of a new Arts and Crafts movement. The original movement, a reaction against the Indus-

trial Revolution, advocated a return to handcraft. The new movement, by contrast, is a reaction against the digital revolution, and what it advocates is a return to sensuousness and materiality. The materiality may be the chill and splash of harbor water or it may be the rough brick of a warehouse—in which case, ironically, it is the Industrial Revolution we are harking back to. Each revolution reverses the last.

For both cities, there's a danger. If the work of the city is indeed that of manufacturing the experience of city life—city life understood as something more public, more material, more diverse and less predictable than the life of the windshield and the television monitor—it will be hard to keep that experience authentic. From the moment we become self-conscious about creating experience, that experience tends to become scripted theater rather than reality.

For architects, the challenge is to create buildings that serve city life without making a self-conscious fetish of it, and to create public spaces that are not so obvious they look as if they ought to have a sign saying "public space." A few years ago, I happened to be staying at a Times Square hotel on the night the hated Yankees won the first of their recent string of World Series victories. It would be hard to imagine an urban space less suited to public assembly than Times Square. But it succeeded magnificently that night. Everyone in greater New York seemed to know exactly where to go. The cops closed off the side streets, but they left Broadway open for an endless parade of honking cars and yelling fans. The city wasn't catering to those fans. It wasn't offering them preconceived urban space. The experience of city life was at its most intense because the city was simply being itself.

Robert Campbell, FAIA, is architecture critic for the Boston Globe.