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Author:

[Lyndon, Donlyn](#)

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Prospects for an Improved Public Realm

The public realm, those places to which we all have ready access, gets little attention these days. Or so it would seem. Most discussion of “the public” in the media is focused on costs and expenses, waste and malfunction, crime and anxiety. The simple daily benefits that accrue from public actions seldom make news. The places we live in are either taken for granted, if they work well, or maligned, if they do not.

The pleasures of the public realm — being able to move with dignity among strangers and acquaintances and to rest freely in places that are held in common — are the foundation of civil society. Rewarding, instructive experiences like finding one’s way through the city with ease, choosing among the activities it offers and enjoying the multitude of investments in buildings, landscapes and infrastructure — the legacy of what others have made — are made possible by the public realm, the places we build or maintain in common.

Our public realm sets the context for community exchange, for the interactions and encounters that construct our daily lives and for private real estate investment. It needs constant care, maintenance, repair and policing. But like so many of the complex things we need in our lives, streets and public spaces become fractured into operational routines, their differing aspects administered by differing agencies with little or

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no communication between them. The result is often confusion and the visual evidence of cross purposes — places that become emblems of neglect. If care begets care, it is even more certain that neglect begets neglect.

Our task as designers is to bring the public realm into focus. We must advocate for its benefits and point out the interplay of public infrastructure and private gain. We must counter the politics of neglect with evidence of how things can be cared for, how places can speak to the common interest even as they flourish through the fruits of individual imagination and investment. We must demonstrate that care for the public realm is care for the structure of our lives.

What, then, would be an improved public realm?

One that is sustainable — a structure of relationships that encourages judicious use of resources and

captures the imagination of its citizens in ways that will sustain their interest and their commitment to community well being.

One in which our collective investment, the heritage of the city as we continually reinvent it, is used to expand and embellish the lives of its citizens.

One that is just — a realm that accommodates diversity and assists the disadvantaged, that serves the interest of those who live and work in a place, who pursue their happiness there, as well as those who own property in its midst, and that is respected and cared for by its citizens and their government.

One that we can imagine and make a part of our lives — not easily, but with a little effort, that little effort that it takes to be civilized.

— *Donlyn Lyndon*



Aerial view of industrial districts of Emeryville and West Berkeley, Calif., including the Bayer, Inc., pharmaceutical research and production campus. (Stefan Curl).