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Caring about Places: Levels of Involvement

Last year PLACES asked one of its authors to write about an artist's proposal for some gardens in New York City. In a subsequent discussion, he indicated that the project we described was politics, not a garden; a garden was plantings, with vistas and paths. We countered that no garden could be apolitical.

Certainly the placement and availability of land, for either public or private use and enjoyment, stems from basic political conditions that determine the types of investment that will be protected and supported. What is the nature of the spaces that a community produces and how can their users share them? Are spaces allowed for nonowners who live nearby or for visitors who pass through a place? What are open or covert controls on the actual use or passage through a place or on the views allowed to those who do not physically enter the space? How does a community provide for its citizens to develop a sense of well-being, of belonging? In what ways can citizens take part in the landscape around them, in gardens of the public realm as well as in secretive backyards?

As the urban political and economic landscape becomes more complex, enclaves develop, where citizens seek to protect their own investments. Some citizens wish to exclude, as in Dearborn, Michigan, where residents would like to close its parks to nonresidents. Some citizens simply wish to stay put, to resist eviction by city housing authorities that have been caught up in the Monopoly game of the city,

where speculative land prices have turned social housing projects into potentially profitable land holdings. Balanced against the rising costs of maintenance, decreases in federal funding, and the prospect of selling out, the emotional investments that residents have made in a place count for little with authorities until they are politicized and made evident.

Designers can make the possibilities evident by exploring the potentials of not only specific places but the vistas and paths of the imagination. Designers also need to be able to recognize opportunities for investment that are appropriate for each situation.

It might follow that shared spaces, public places, would be the result of a set of agreements about what such spaces might be like and how they might be used. In the cases of extreme poverty or great affluence, however, such places will more likely be the result of bitter disagreement.

Our common places may develop from long-range views, formal invention of urban vistas and preserves, or the close-grained tenacity of inch-by-inch maintenance of a few plants and the placement of a few stone steps by the front door. Detailed investments of care become platforms for new views of self and place in a long struggle for some rooted sense of dignity, that is, for power of place.

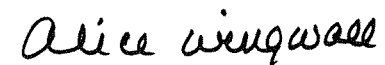
Public places result from the continual jockeying of formal design and evolving patterns of use and

power. The middle ground consists of perceptive understanding, analysis and reuse of neglected places within established towns, and inventive new patterns using already existing formal devices to touch the imagination. A river may become a festive floating trail, a poem may wrap the most primal places in a coverlet of suggestive landscape, the keen eye may find liveliness in shadows.

Our most engaging places are formed of three kinds of investment that show up only indirectly on the balance sheets: formal invention, tenacious maintenance, and evocative mediation.



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