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Caring about Places: In Public

Place has come back into American public life. The demand for distinction in the places where we live is heard in many corners and it begins to bring results. Murmurs of alienation are being replaced by articulate insistence. Architects are using their skills to shape an intelligible public realm. Vacuous spaces are being filled with the tangible presence of civic intention.

Or at least some are.

The Back Bay/South End station in Boston projects civic intention in a light-handed way, with close attention to the nature of its site. The structures of the station merge images of arrival with subtle, particular forms that meet the stringent demands of the site yet reward attention in many ways. It could not be the same in another place.

Rowe's Wharf, also in Boston, steps out into the water at the edge of downtown. It is bonded to its site. Its materials include the brick and granite that have characterized downtown; its great vaulted entry would be bombastic anywhere but at the link between a great harbor and a tightly knit city.

In California many small towns that have recently prospered have plans for ambitious new civic centers that stake out their particular identities. In Mountain View these buildings are cast as memorable landmarks around a public plaza linking pioneer park and main street. But renewed interest in the public character of the place does not stop with its monuments.

In Mountain View this reformulated identity will be extended through the center of the town by an inventive street design. Carefully formed edges and fixtures will wrest main street away from the conventional geometries of traffic and drainage and proclaim its importance as a distinct place for human encounter.

Urban design practice is inexorably changing. The bland assumption that sweeping renewal should clear the way for unfettered and sterilized development is being replaced by respect for the parceled, contested patterns of the traditional city. These patterns build places in increments, with streets that are avenues of exchange, building types that relate to the known fabric of the city, and public access to spaces with recognizable character.

In this issue Anne Vernez Moudon traces the course of such practices in plans for Södra Station, Stockholm and Mission Bay, San Francisco. John de Monchaux argues for an enthusiastic recognition that cities are, after all, places of incubation and change, destined to be messy—and better for it.

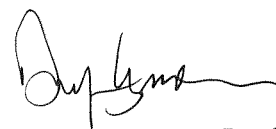
William Faulkner invented a landscape of such scope for his novels. Yoknapatawpha is a fictional place modeled closely on the Oxford, Mississippi, of his lifetime. Tom Hines shows how, with close observation and deft words, Faulkner entwined the lives of his characters with traditional aspects of the place.

Katie Traeger, writing several generations later and from the indeterminacy of Los Angeles, uses the austere singularity of the Museum of Contemporary Art as an anchor point for meditation. The intense abstraction of its forms prompts reflections that are at once unpredictable and poignant.

The public art plan for Phoenix, Arizona, is intended to bind places of intense reverie to a larger construct of the inhabited landscape. This extensive program, reaching out into the desert with the publicly funded systems of the city, sets out to capture an order that is unique. Artists, community groups, and sponsors working within the plan will be participants in a civic intention scaled to the landscape of the locale.

The design of places can engage communities in profoundly constructive dialogue. Vision sparks debate; a sense of direction can mobilize disparate forces to a common goal; the threat of displaced memories can bring forth a demand for articulated constraints. This issue ends with material from The Mayors Institute on City Design, conferences sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, in which those who are politically on the line discuss ways in which design ideas can serve their cities.

The prospects are promising.



Donlynn Lyndon