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Incremental Utopias

Allan B. Jacobs

The ICDC was a difficult and complex competition. It did not encourage or seem to ask for clear, imageable physical designs. Its substance was real, messy, complex urban areas and those who wrote the program were looking for complex solutions.

Competitors were required to focus on not one but three areas, each different from the other, each with its own very separate problems and challenges, each distant enough from the others that their physical, social inter-relatedness was not always clear. Only one area, at the urban fringe, offered a reasonably clean slate for designers to really exercise their hands and for that one it was not at all clear that any development and therefore any design was appropriate.

Entrants, to a point, were asked to choose their own programs (albeit from a pre-prepared palette). The organizers invested considerable effort in presenting presumably rational program options for competitors to consider: slow growth versus fast growth, more or less money available, greater or lesser public investment, and so forth.

Yet, the connection between choice and physical consequence was not always clear. This requirement might well have proven frustrating. Diagrams might have provided a solution, the kind of verbal pictorial cartoon that makes clear intended relationships between the city, region and socio-economic conditions, the kind of clear diagram that Ebenezer Howard used to present his garden city ideas.

Entrants also were asked to form interdisciplinary teams. Bringing together an interdisciplinary team might not be so easy, except at a physical place where diverse disciplines exist at one location. Think about how designers actually prepare competition entries—in one central office or place with drafting boards and the tools of the designer, often after regular working hours and with a team of people who are known to each other and can and do come together regularly (perhaps one senior designer and a group of juniors).

Remember also that the products, on three boards, were to be physical, imageable drawings, something to attract the eye and then, via those physical images, to make mental connections to socio-economic ways of living, both past and present. With that kind of product, the person who holds the drawing pencil is king. Even if an interdisciplinary team is put together, the leadership is likely to be with the designer.

One might have expected the competition would be inviting to groups from universities, particularly of students working with one or two professors. The competition seemed made for an interdisciplinary design study done as a semester's

work in a required course. My bet is that's who entered in large numbers. If that's right, it would explain the large number of naive and unsophisticated entries.

There wasn't any problem coming up with three winners, but the fact that we couldn't really fill the slots allotted for medalists is instructive: few outstanding ideas at even one of the scales, and fewer still that were able to integrate a vision and some kind of coherent point of view or philosophy with actual designs, at all three scales.

It would do us well to reread something like Kevin Lynch's "place utopia" in his book *Good City Form* and then say "What would such changes mean in terms of initial changes to the urban physical environment?" I recall only one entry that really did that. It embraced an urban vision that looked to ecological and environmental responsibility, logically proposing truck gardens (maybe even small farms) in or adjacent to the most central location and looking at alternative energy sources, in this case, wind. It used the windmills as the visual focal point entering the center: better, I think, than the seemingly inevitable high rises.

Perhaps competitors understand that the enthrallment with large projects, ones that are sponsored by big government or big business and result in large land holdings controlled centrally by few very wealthy people, has been misplaced, is simply not appropriate and rarely results in good urban design. But, incrementalism and modesty of scale rarely make for eye-catching graphics. Competitors had difficulty communicating ideas that were not physically large, even though they might foretell a more appropriate urban lifestyle and image.

One might have expected a lot more focus on streets: alternative designs, rearrangements, landscape solutions, transitions between buildings and public ways. Streets still take up from 25 percent to 35 percent of all developed land. But transportation technocrats continue to engineer fewer and larger streets and block with even fewer intersections.

What was positive about the designs at the urban edge was that we didn't see the bevy of high-rise point towers or long, long slabs that so characterize the outskirts of many European cities. Thanks for that. At same time, competitors had the most difficulty at this scale and location. Maybe that means designers have given up any real hope of designing real places at the urban fringe, places instead of sprawl. If that's so, then it is a terrible commentary on the ineffectiveness of urban planning and of our political will. Out of just such a malaise might come some renewed dedication to the notions of urban limits and to dealing with the edge and the interrelationships between urban and non-urban life. If the competition could serve that end, and that's a lot to ask, it will have served a useful purpose.