REVIEW

OCTOBER DIARY: IN SEARCH OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

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I attended three important city design meetings that took place in rapid succession last October — Urban Design, Reshaping Our Cities; Portland’s Fourth Annual Regional Growth Conference and the first Congress for the New Urbanism.

Reflecting on my kaleidoscopic exposure to case studies, projects, papers, speeches and panel discussions, I have concluded that it is now possible to discern a larger pattern in this collective outpouring, one that suggests that an important prise de conscience has occurred.

We face the awesome powers of change, dissolution, the loss of the social contract, the erosion of place, the explosion of big box retail on the strip, the proliferation of gap-toothed and depressed urban streets and gated enclaves at the end of the latest highway; we are challenged by the expanding virtual space of the video screen and the make-believe hyperspace of theme park attractions.

Nonetheless, there is a surprising mood of resolve, determination and will to keep faith with the city and to make it work. There is a growing group of seasoned urban ideologues who are struggling valiantly to define, forge and bring into being viable models of urbaneity, old or new. They are exhibiting a pragmatism that defies easy ideological classification; they are imbued with the preservation of authentic existing urban places and the possibility of creating new ones; they are eager to form new alliances and to make use of new tools.

Reining Regional Growth in Portland

In Portland, for example, 800 people came out in shifts to a one-day event to hear from a combination of experts, politicians, officials and activists about options for accommodating future growth. Should Portland, they asked, grow up or be more urban, or grow out and embrace continued sprawl?

The planners and elected officials of the new Metro government eloquently and persuasively pressed the audience members to face fundamental contradictions in their own value systems. What are the implications, for example, of calling for preservation of natural areas, on the one hand, and no limitations on personal mobility, on the other?

Most interestingly, the audience expressed a strong skepticism about relying in the future on smart cars and
highways to forestall more fundamen- 
tal choices about urban form. One 
might expect people to embrace tech-
nological fixes that will keep the status 
quo going. Although some light rail 
lines also fall into the category of tech-
nological fixes, Portland’s MAX system 
had the potential to be different 
because there is a strong interest in 
planning for denser development 
around stations. Unlike smart high-
ways and rail systems being built else-
where, MAX might inspire significant 
changes in the urban fabric.

**Testing the New Urbanism**

The Congress for the New Urbanism 
was a gathering with a point of view 
and a mission. Every aspect, from the 
careful selection of speakers and partic-
ipants, to format of assembly, reviews of 
projects and papers, to the choice of 
venues (Alexandria’s Athenaeum and 
Lyceum), was designed to reinforce the 
central message of the movement to 
refurbish American urbanism.

Numerous versions and forms of 
pedestrian and transit-oriented com-
munities were compared and began to 
be critically evaluated. Serious ques-
tions were raised about the impact of 
these, especially where they occur on 
greenfields sites, rather than in cities 
or suburbs. A quite justified concern 
was that without vigilance, this move-
ment could be co-opted by marketers 
as simply justifying another style of 
retreat and withdrawal, bypassing the 
esential goals of diversity, openness 
and connectivity.

Many serious questions arose for 
which there are as of yet no satisfying 
answers. For example, none of the 
recent attempts to forge new hybrids of 
main street and shopping center are 
totally convincing, but historical analy-
sis presented of the evolution of these 
types was rich and provocative. The 
audience itself became the subject of 
discussion. The almost complete 
absence of non-white faces was a glar-
ing omission, which must be addressed 
in upcoming congresses.

Nevertheless, the Congress was an 
extraordinarily auspicious start that 
holds great promise for the next congress, to 
be held in Los Angeles this spring, and 
the two others that are expected.

**Postscript**

After immersion in these relatively 
friendly waters, one is left with a sense 
that we urbanists may have won (at 
least the battle for) the hearts and 
minds of many in the design and plan-
ing professions, the schools and the 
media — and a small group of pro-
gressive developers whose presence in 
Alexandria was most heartening. And 
there can be no doubt that the body of 
concepts and ideas expressed at 
these gatherings is gaining strength 
in such circles.

Yet this victory is still an illusionary 
one. We still have to come to terms 
with the limited ability of this rudder 
to turn the ship — the fundamental 
infrastructure and intractability of the status 
quo, whose explicit and implicit 
assumptions imbue every statute, zon-
ing ordinance, building code, engi-
neering standard, lending decision and 
marketing strategy across this conti-
nent. The tentacles of this status quo 
may lack the fervor of any conviction 
attached to ideas, but they are still 
spreading like wildfire and rarely challenged 
across the globe.

At the same time, decades of strenu-
ous procession and institutionalization 
have ensured that the suburban dream 
of dispersal, mobility and conspicuous 
consumption of ecosystems and land 
maintain a powerful pull on the collec-
tive North American psyche. This 
dream remains the barometer of per-
sonal and familial success, as the basis 
for the major monetary investment of 
one’s life and as the preferred vehicle 
for escaping involvement with society’s 
ills. A Herculean effort is still required 
to gain control of the vast and partially 
unplotted machinery of control and 
regulation on the one hand, and to 
influence the complex nexus of individ-
ual and collective choices about living 
atterns on the other.

In the end, North Americans are 
truly to be offered at least the option 
of more sustainable communities, power-
ful arguments and tools from outside 
the traditional arena of design are 
needed to broaden the critique and 
clarify the choices. These must com-
bine a rigorous understanding of the 
real costs to society and individuals of 
the status quo and a renewal of com-
munications habits of responsibility, 
connectedness and concern for health, 
safety, well-being and prosperity.

We must learn to do this for the 
whole place and the entire population, 
not just for me and mine.