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## OCTOBER DIARY: IN SEARCH OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

*This fall an unusual grouping of conferences dealing with design, urbanism and sustainability were convened. Places invited a series of review articles from people who attended several of the meetings.*

*Ken Greenberg*

### **Urban Design: Reshaping Our Cities**

*Seattle, WA; Sept. 29 - Oct. 1*  
City of Seattle  
Institute for Urban Design  
University of Washington

### **Fourth Annual Regional Growth Conference**

*Portland, OR; Oct. 4*

### **Congress on the New Urbanism I**

*Alexandria, VA; Oct. 8 - 11*

### **Sustainable Strategies for Community Design and Building Materials**

*Seattle, WA.*  
American Institute of Architects  
(committees on Regional  
Planning, Architects in Education  
and Environment)

### **Building with Value**

*Seattle, WA; Nov. 12 - 13*  
Sustainable Building  
Collaborative

### **ACSA Administrators Conference**

*San Antonio, TX; Nov. 20-22*  
Association of Collegiate Schools  
of Architecture

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, dislocation, 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 idealists who are struggling valiantly to define, forge

and bring into being viable models of urbanity, old or new. They are exhibiting a pragmatism that defies easy ideological classification; they are enthused about 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 and 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 fundamental choices about urban form. One might expect people to embrace technological fixes that will keep the status quo going. Although some light rail lines also fall into the category of technological fixes, Portland's MAX system has the potential to be different because there is a strong interest in planning for denser development around stations. Unlike smart highways and rail systems being built elsewhere, 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 participants, 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 reform American urbanism.

Numerous versions and forms of pedestrian and transit-oriented communities were compared and began to be critically evaluated. Serious questions 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 movement could be co-opted by marketers as simply justifying another style of retreat and withdrawal, bypassing the essential goals of diversity, openness and connectivity.

Many serious questions arose for which there are as of yet no satisfactory answers. For example, none of the recent attempts to forge new hybrids of main street and shopping center are entirely convincing, but historical analysis 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 glaring omission, which must be addressed in upcoming congresses.

Nevertheless, the Congress was an extremely 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 planning professions, the schools and the media — and a small group of progressive 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 credence in such circles.

Yet this victory is still an illusory one. We still have to come to terms with the limited ability of this rudder to turn the ship — the fundamental inertia and intractability of the status quo, whose explicit and implicit assumptions imbue every statute, zoning ordinance, building code, engineering standard, lending decision and marketing strategy across this continent. The tentacles of this status quo may lack the fervor of any conviction

attached to ideas, but they are still spreading lifeless and rarely challenged across the globe.

At the same time, decades of strenuous promotion and institutionalization have ensured that the suburban dream of dispersal, mobility and conspicuous consumption of resources and land maintain a powerful pull on the collective North American psyche. This dream remains the barometer of personal 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 unpiloted machinery of control and regulation on the one hand, and to influence the complex nexus of individual and collective choices about living patterns on the other.

In the end, if North Americans are truly to be offered at least the option of more sustainable communities, powerful arguments and tools from outside the traditional arena of design are needed to broaden the critique and clarify the choices. These must combine a rigorous understanding of the real costs to society and individuals of the status quo and a renewal of communitarian values of responsibility, connectedness and concern for health, safety, well-being education and prosperity. We must learn to do this for the whole place and the entire population, not just for me and mine.