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Streets: Old Paradigm, New Investment

Two years ago, when we decided to characterize *Places* as “A Forum of Environmental Design,” as opposed to simply a journal, we committed to sponsoring a range of activities — research, workshops and public discussions — that could engage our readers in new ways and provide content for *Places* and other publications. We are now pleased to report on the first events we’ve organized.

During the past year, *Places*’ editors convened two day-long working sessions at which designers, scholars and public officials discussed what design issues and resistances are emerging in making good, even great, streets a part of every community. About 30 people attended one meeting at the University of California, Berkeley, last November. About about 40 attended one at Pratt Institute in New York, this past April.

The presenters described how streets, whose role as urban space has been devalued by single-minded design standards, a fear of crime and the information superhighway, are once again receiving careful design attention. “Since the turn of the century, street sections have been drawn by engineers. But now streets are being designed for many uses,” remarked urban designer Ken Greenberg, the keynote commentator in New York. “All dimensions in the right of way are being tested against each other to make the street a complex social space.”

Presentations included case studies of street design projects, especially those that approach streets as spaces that must be designed for multiple activities. Mike Smiley and John Kriken, for example, described how San Francisco’s Embarcadero is being reborn as a transit, traffic and recreational space — as well as a transition to the waterfront — now that the Embarcadero Freeway has been torn down.

Other presenters described new street standards and hierarchies, either proposed or adopted

in codes or guidelines. Greenberg presented alternative street design standards he helped the province of Ontario, Canada, prepare. The standards include a wider range of street types than is typical and are related to the form of buildings along them.

Yodan Rofé presented boulevard design guidelines he developed with Allan Jacobs and Elizabeth S. MacDonald. They studied traffic and pedestrian patterns on existing boulevards and tested alternative designs with transportation officials in several cities. They concluded that boulevards can carry high traffic volumes yet still be vibrant urban places if local and through movement are separated properly.

The symposia also examined implementation strategies. Terry Bray and Victor Rhodes of Portland’s transportation department explained how they won support from citizens and other public agencies for very narrow street types. Nathalie Beauvais of Boston’s Redevelopment Authority explained how the “Boston Boulevards” project, an effort to redesign a web of arterials into a coherent network of streets that balance auto, pedestrian and transit use, grew out of reconstruction projects already scheduled by the city’s public works department and the Metropolitan Boston Transportation Authority.

This project will result in the accumulation, presentation and publication (in a future issue of *Places* and, we hope, a book) of viable case studies for street design in a range of contexts — urban, older suburbs and newer suburbs. In the long run, we hope that the project will inspire an ongoing conversation about street design through follow-up articles, future teaching and design projects and, perhaps, subsequent forums of a similar nature.

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