



## Peer Reviewed

### Title:

The Design of Cities [The Mayors Institute on City Design]

### Journal Issue:

[Places, 5\(4\)](#)

### Author:

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### Publication Date:

1989

### Publication Info:

Places

### Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/5d25k7jd>

### Acknowledgements:

The article was originally published in Places Journal. For reprint information, contact [places@berkeley.edu](mailto:places@berkeley.edu). To subscribe, visit [www.places-journal.org](http://www.places-journal.org).

### Keywords:

urban design, placemaking, public space, authority, puerto rico, spiro kostof

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# The Design of Cities

## Spiro Kostof

There are two kinds of cities, conventional wisdom asserts—those based on a conscious design, set down at one moment in the name of some overseeing authority; and those others that grew naturally, subject to no master scheme but the passage of time, the lay of the land, and the daily life of their occupants.

The first are masterminded by rulers, political figures and colonial administrators, by military experts, by religious groups, by reformers and paternalistic industrialists, and by agencies like railroad or land development companies. The design itself might engage the skills of ordinary surveyors, engineers, architects, or more recently, members of the discrete profession of city planning. Cities of the latter sort, those that come about without benefit of designers, are called “irregular” or “unplanned” or “spontaneous” or, most often and perhaps least accurately, “organic.”

It is not hard to tell these two kinds of cities apart. Palmanova, with its nine-sided and strictly radial plan, is one thing; the labyrinthine complication of Venice, which established Palmanova as a military outpost in 1593, is another. Often the two versions of urban arrangement end up side by side. In Europe, new additions to the dense medieval cores of historic towns were always regular; and modern colonial powers overwhelmed the intricate native pattern of North African medinas and the ancient towns of India and Indochina with grand geometric designs, quickened by single-minded diagonals and accented by formal squares.

The issue, then, seems to be order and its corollary, control. And so, depending on your view of things, you will either favor the planned city over the unplanned for its formal discipline, or else deplore its rigidity. Again, you might fault the random ways of the unplanned city, or find praise for its celebration of an eventful topography, the responsive, indeed instinctive evolution of its form and its native ease with the rhythms of communal living.

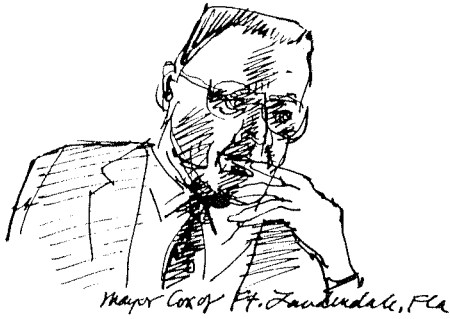
Even so, this simple and obvious duality does not take us very far. It has to be seriously qualified.

First of all, no city, however random it may seem to us, can be said to be unplanned. Beneath the strangest twist of lane or alley, behind the most fitfully bounded public place, lies an order beholden to prior occupation, to long-established conventions of the social contract, to a string of compromises between individual rights and the common will.

Look at the map of New Orleans. Those peculiar, fan-shaped street clusters west of the Vieux Carrée are not a planner's fancy. They memorialize the “long lots” of the original French plantations, squeezed between the curves of the Mississippi and the backswamp. Look at the mazelike street plan of Old Delhi. Its order is not the calculated visual order of geometry, true, but it has order nonetheless. Inscribed within the tangled network of the indigenous quarter is a coherent social structure of

*I thought that it was very stimulating to listen to the significance of the horizontal face of the city; there is a tendency in many of us to think about capital improvement projects and urban development in terms of vertical growth, and yet at the same time we seem to neglect what happens at the horizontal level.*

Baltasar Corrada Del Rio  
Mayor, San Juan, Puerto Rico



*I mentioned impact fees earlier on; I think we've just begun, in this country, to see the beginning of taxation for social purposes.*

Robert O. Cox  
Mayor, Fort Lauderdale, Florida

inward-looking neighborhood clusters. These are based on the extended family and on ethnic or occupational identity, and they are separated by the linear markets along the primary streets.

And a second important qualification has to be registered here. We make a habit of reading the nature of a city's form from its plan alone. We decide whether the city is "planned" or "unplanned" purely on the evidence of a two-dimensional diagram of lots and streets. But this diagram reveals nothing about urban character, nothing about the quality of urban spaces. The design of cities has to do precisely with how we flesh out the diagram, which is to say, how we articulate its lines in three dimensions.

On paper, a grid is a grid is a grid. But Savannah's grid is not like Chicago's or Philadelphia's, let alone New York's. The differences appear above ground. They have to do, among other things, with the height of buildings and their materials, the size of blocks and the presence or absence of alleys cut through them, street width in relation to street walls, the frequency and shape of open spaces, landscaping, and architectural styles.

This is not to say that the initial lines laid out by a planner or a planning agency are neutral. They are in fact the graph of an *intention*. Even as prosaic a formula as the stingily gridded plat of those hundreds of railroad towns of the second half of the nineteenth

century said something—I am out to sell land as quickly and expeditiously as possible, it said, and I am not going to waste this profit-rich resource in urban design frills, or the charitable provision of public land for parks and squares. The Puritan township of colonial New England, on the other hand, was nothing less than the matrix for a pious society that was entering therewith into a covenant with God.

Or again, take L'Enfant's plan for Washington, D.C. We know from pronouncements of the designer himself that, far from being an innocent reordering of prior settlements, it had imperial pretensions. Vast beyond the reasonable prospects of the young nation, the plan charted symbolic relationships among the institutions of government, and provided commanding positions for their architecture. "The plan should be drawn on such a scale," L'Enfant wrote President Washington in September 1789, "as to leave room for that aggrandisement & embellishment which the increase of wealth of the Nation will permit it to pursue at any period however remote." And he has proved right.

It is this potential of a city plan to guide the future shape of a community that Daniel Burnham had in mind a hundred years later when he said, "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood. Make big plans, aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble diagram once recorded will never die."



*Ortha Shackleford, Mayor of Little Rock, Arkansas*

Yet Burnham, as a planner of cities, also knew better. He knew that without constant vigilance and the citizens' abiding belief in the original premises of their association, the plan, however, noble, had no chance of survival. L'Enfant was lucky, and Washington was a special case. A striking Baroque plan that went him one better, drawn up by Judge Augustus B. Woodward for Detroit in 1805, had no such luck. It had reverted to a commonplace, but practical grid within 10 years.

The forces that modify this diagram, sometimes precipitously, are various. The needs of a population increase, social and political shifts, pressures of land speculation, the type of urban transportation and the volume of traffic are among them. William Penn did not foresee the additional narrow streets that began to split the generous blocks of his plan for Philadelphia very soon after it was laid out, in 1683. Nor did L'Enfant foresee the alleys carved inside his residential blocks in the 1880s.

It was crowding that brought about the subdivision of the original Philadelphia scheme. It was greed at work in Washington, as well-off property owners built rental alley dwellings in their backyards to house poor black families who poured in after the Civil War. The disavowal of Penn's intentions had its good side; it helped to extend home ownership to many more Philadelphians than his land division would have allowed. In Washington the infiltration of the

blocks produced shameful, covert alley slums.

Power designs cities, and the rawest form of power is control of urban land. When the state is the principal owner, it can put down whatever pattern it chooses. This was true of the royal cities of ancient Persia, imperial capitals of China, and the Baroque capitals of European princes. It was true of company towns, and it is still true in the Soviet Union and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe, where the rights of private property are severely curtailed. The centralized planning that undisputed authority of this sort promotes is clear-cut and hierarchic. The urban form is unambiguously legible.

In the long history of cities that stretches for more than five millennia, from Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley to the new towns of today, this exercise in totalitarian design has limited currency. Most of the cities created by fiat quickly revert to multiple ownership, as the lots are sold or alienated to settlers. The vast bulk of the world's cities, moreover, do not go back to such single-minded beginnings. The power that comes of owning urban land, is, as a matter of course, broadly shared—therefore city form is a negotiated and ever-changing design. This involved, continuous process presupposes another kind of power—the power of arbitration. The law sets limits on the freedom of property owners to do what they please with their holdings, and municipal effort coordinates the shared aspects of

urban design, such as the street network and systems of utilities.

There are as many variants of this public control as there are cities. At one extreme stands the model of the traditional Islamic city. Here physical form was freely improvised, subject only to the respect of custom and the Muslim's right to visual privacy. You were not told what to do, what kind of city to design; you were only enjoined from doing things that threatened accepted social behavior. The concern for privacy, for example, determined where doors and windows would go on building fronts, and how high buildings would rise.

At the other extreme is the Western model of the legally binding master plan and its supporting codes and regulations, according to which city form is coercively revised. In this instance, everything, from street widths and zoned uses to signage and balcony size, is minutely determined by law. The power of eminent domain wielded in the name of the public good can redraw property lines, raze entire neighborhoods, and thereby affect the social structure of the city along with its physical form. This is how the Paris of Napoleon III and Mussolini's Rome were designed.

Americans, by and large, have been unsympathetic to public intervention in the design of cities. We were content to let private property rights and speculative forces guide the development of urban form. In the absence of hereditary princes and with our deep-felt aversion to



authoritarian government, we allowed the public realm of the downtown to be shaped by private business, and the city edge to spread at the whim of land speculators and developers. The courts routinely turned down official zoning attempts until the teens of this century; eminent domain was not exercised on a large scale until the federally encouraged urban renewal program of the 1950s.

The public good in our case was gauged by public opinion. Our first nationwide awareness of civic beauty was painfully ushered in by hundreds of hardworking improvement societies between the Civil War and the First World War. They found their membership in cultural circles, women's clubs, universities, and businessmen's associations, and they launched a tenacious campaign of public education for the sake of tree-planting and street furniture, sewers and flowerbeds. They called townspeople to "civic rallies," and ran postcard campaigns to pressure town fathers on street paving or the cleaning up of the waterfront. Their successors were city-planning commissions, which started out as independent citizens' groups before they began to be authorized by legislative act.

This spirit of participation has flared up intermittently since then. It was the public outcry of the 1960s that put an end to the licentious destruction of older neighborhoods, under Title I of the Housing Act of 1949, in the name of slum clearance and urban renewal. The same passionate concern for the wholeness of

our cities stalled the urban freeway program, beginning with the successful efforts of New Orleanians to beat back federal plans for a Riverfront Expressway, which would have severed the Vieux Carrée from its waterfront.

Urban designs is extraordinarily more complex now than it was at the turn of the century, perhaps the high point of community involvement. City form has its legions of experts, and municipal authority can provide for the unempowered, if it chooses to, on a scale that private effort cannot. But the case for our participation in the design of cities is as strong now as it was in the days of civic art societies and the City Beautiful.

The principal debate today concerns growth, because growth, too long considered an unequivocal blessing, is inseparably bound up with the quality of urban life. While private interests are entitled to seek their advantage in the urban fabric, and city authorities and their experts are paid to find wholesale planning solutions to the problems of unfettered growth, it is the citizens as a collective voice who must ultimately decide the shape of their city. The aesthetic vision of how cities will look will always be supplied by professional designers. It is perfectly appropriate, indeed imperative, for the citizens to decide the limits of that vision.

Within our pluralist tradition, and a system of government that instinctively believes in the efficacy of checks and balances, the design

of our cities cannot be consigned unquestioningly to planners, nor delegated to the private world of corporations and developers. Community opposition to the Columbus Circle project in New York, the San Francisco skyline ordinance of 1985, and the many other no-growth or slow-growth initiatives are perfectly legitimate responses of an involved citizenry. If we still believe that the city is a cumulative, generational artifact which harbors our values as a community and supplies the setting where we can learn to live together, then it is our collective responsibility to oversee its design.