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## The Mayors' Institute on City Design

### A Proposal : Joseph P. Riley, Jr.

Cities are being built and rebuilt. Some of the work is good. Some is terrible. Some is human in scale. Much is not. Some is attractive. Much is ugly. In Europe and in a few places in the U.S., we see attractive, livable human scale, beautifully designed and built cities. In the U.S., this is the exception rather than the rule.

Twenty-five years ago the obituary of the American city was being written. No more. The issue is no longer whether cities are dying but, rather, what kind of cities are being rebuilt. Will they be of human scale, oriented to the people, or ugly, brutal and cold? What can we do to make sure that the development that is occurring in our cities will help create attractive places and that we will be a nation of attractive and livable cities?

I have often said that I am the chief urban designer of my city. By that I mean that because of my position as mayor, I have many opportunities to affect development. Most large development plans come through my office. Almost always, the general support of the mayor is needed. Sometimes specific city approvals, such as variances, are required. Mayors also can be proactive, seeking out and encouraging certain development.

With so many of these projects, there are many pressure points or opportunities to make them better for the city or to allow them to be ordinary or worse. This is the case with most mayors. The more sensitive mayors are to good urban design, issues of livability, scale and diversity, the more willing and able they will be to help develop higher quality. If we could institute a program aimed at increasing mayors' sophistication and interest in urban design, we could have a substantial impact on the quality of development in American cities.

Mayors are very quick studies. They have to

be to get elected in the first place. Once elected, depending on the various problems or crises in their city, they can become experts in particular fields. Mayors can become adroit and knowledgeable in urban economic development, in international trade, the arts or public safety, and they can be adroit in urban design. I am not saying that mayors should become architects or landscape architects, but that they should become so interested in and aware of issues of quality urban design that those who would develop in the city begin to expect that they will have to live up to higher standards than before.

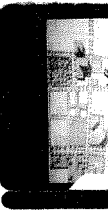
To foster this knowledge among mayors, a permanent or annual institute should be developed. It could be named something like "The Mayors' Institute on Urban Design" and held at the University of Virginia. There would be a meeting once a year with a manageable number of mayors invited, say fifteen to thirty. Each year a different group would be invited. Perhaps the institute would invite the mayor and the city planning director. This would be an invitation-only event to make attendance be deemed an honor. An interesting program and curriculum would be developed. Perhaps there could be a function at Monticello, certainly at the Rotunda on the lawn. Efforts would be made to make it not only interesting but also fun.

I recommend the University of Virginia because you are the dean of the School of Architecture, because the campus offers mayors a retreat-like atmosphere surrounded by beautiful and lasting architecture and, most important, because it was designed by a politician, Thomas Jefferson. We would need to invite not only architects, landscape architects and architectural critics, but developers as well, and we would need at least one big name (like Philip Johnson or I.M. Pei) to address the meeting.

It may well be that this is something that I am personally interested in but is not feasible or



The Rotunda, part of the Academic Village designed by Thomas Jefferson, is the heart of the University of Virginia campus and the setting for the national Mayors' Institute. Courtesy University of Virginia.



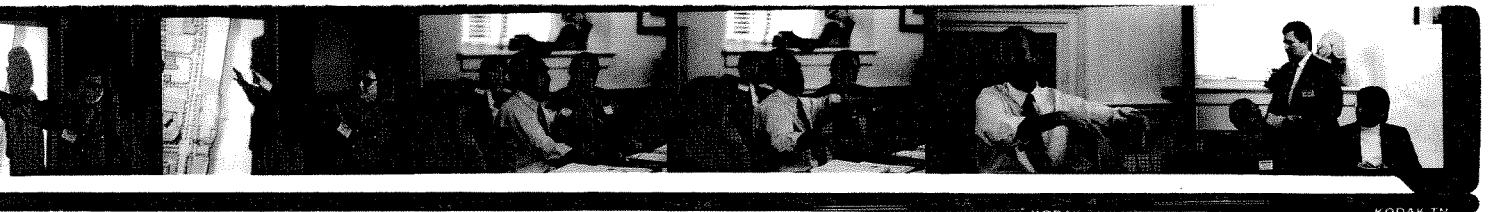
would be of limited appeal to the mayors. It will require substantial energy and commitment, and I imagine we would need to draw support from various public and private institutions, such as the University of Virginia, the National Endowment for the Arts and the United States Conference of Mayors.

I'm convinced that mayors can be catalysts for improving the awareness about and the quality of design in their cities, and hope we can establish a program that will rally them to this cause.

*January, 1985*

his political and bureaucratic reputation on the line by becoming deeply involved in design. Each believed that better designed cities made for better citizens and had worked tirelessly, and at some cost, to prove it.

Having worked for six and a half years for Lindsay, I was certain that city design policies could be most effectively guided at the mayoral level. The invitation boldly suggested that mayors, knowingly or not, are cities' most important urban design leaders — so many of the decisions they and their planning directors make have design implications.



### **The Best Sort of Schooling : Jaquelin Robertson**

The history of starts is important to evaluating outcomes.

The genesis of the Mayors' Institute was a symposium, "The Politics of Design," that I organized at the University of Virginia School of Architecture in fall, 1984. The symposium explored, from a politician's viewpoint, the factors that influence the delivery of planning and design services to U.S. cities. Does urban design have an effective popular constituency? What are the necessary requirements for implementing design policies? And what are the political costs or benefits of doing so?

The symposium sought news from the front line. Specifically, it examined the experience of two prominent mayors and a leading development director — John Lindsay of New York, Joseph P. Riley, Jr., of Charleston, S.C., and Edward Logue of New Haven, Boston and New York State's Urban Development Corporation. Each had put

After the symposium, Riley enthusiastically suggested that this kind of forum could be an ongoing institute that could advance our cause throughout the country — other mayors would certainly be interested in attending. His January, 1985, letter testifies both to his understanding of the issues involved and his commitment to acting on his beliefs. With it he became the "godfather" of the Mayors' Institute.

Riley had taken on the regeneration of Charleston, an endangered city when he came to office in 1975, and was incoming head of the U.S. Conference of Mayors; he could speak for and to a broad national constituency. I persuaded Frank Hueford, president of the University of Virginia, to allow future institutes to use the Academic Village. We sought financial support from Adele Chatfield-Taylor, then head of the National Endowment for the Arts Design Program and organizational advice from Joan Abrahamson, a former White House Fellow and Director of the Jefferson

Above and following pages:  
The Mayors' Institute. Courtesy  
Daniel S. Grogan.

Institute in California. Thus Joe would bring the politicians, Adele the lolly (and its important imprimatur), Joan a brilliantly practical sense of organization and I, on Jefferson's behalf, the setting — and, I swore, the Founder's blessing.

Joe, Adele, Joan and I agreed on several important shaping premises that set the tone and, I believe, accounted for the Mayors' Institute's initial success. First, each mayor would have to commit for two and a half days; no late arrivals or early departures. Second, they could not bring any advisors. They had to present personally both an

There would be roughly an equal number of mayors as faculty and their presentations would be interspersed — mayors addressing specific problems, resource participants more generic ones. Small groups working on large problems seemed like the most practical first step: an Institute would usually have not more than sixteen participants, the size of Jefferson's ideal learning group and the number around which the Academic Village was organized.

Finally, the meetings would take place in the Rotunda and some of the meals in the pavilions

executive summary of their city (in any format they chose but including maps and postcards, both contemporary and historic) and of the most critical planning and design problem that they faced. Third, there would be no press and, other than NEA staff, student helpers and invited faculty, no audience — no one to grandstand to. This was to be an open, candid and off-the-record discussion among peers who could share problems and prospects with one another.

As resource faculty we agreed to select professionals who had real experience in the politics as well as the design of cities. We wanted veterans with scars. Being in combat is different from merely writing about it and changes one's perspective with respect to what advice is most useful, what policies have the best chance of survival, and how to establish priorities and take political flak. Offsetting this pragmatically inclined group we would seek critics and urbanists who seemed interested in bringing theory and practice together — intellectual activists.

and gardens, all designed by a politician — architect. The participants were to be treated as the VIPs we felt they were so that in their memory the beauty, hospitality and pleasure of pointed informal conversation or a stroll in a garden would meld with the advice about hard problems and underscore the message of the values of the civilizing setting — the very thing we were meeting about.

These opening assumptions helped make the first few institutes different and compelling — very personal, interactive, supportive and, most important, educating to all of us. We were on the right track; the mayors were where it was at and they have blossomed.

The Mayors' Institute has been among the most rewarding and enjoyable professional activities of my life, the early resource faculty among my most valued friends and the mayors a continuing inspiration. It has been the best sort of schooling.

*October, 1995*

**A Progress Report : Joseph P. Riley, Jr.**

The Mayors' Institute on City Design has helped change the face of urban America for the better. It has been successful beyond my highest hopes. In more than 200 cities in the U.S., mayors have returned home from the Mayors' Institute as passionate and insightful urban designers. There are new waterfront parks, historic districts, protected skylines, tree-lined thoroughfares, beautiful affordable housing, energetic downtowns, restored residential neighborhoods, more sensitive transportation departments and systems, more human-scaled public buildings in the heart

Joan Abrahamson and others devising the appropriate framework from the beginning. We insisted that the mayors come without staff and present by themselves the urban design problem in their community. This has been enormously important: had we also invited staff such as a city planner or city manager, the mayors would have probably deferred to their experts. Consequently, mayors learn, many for the first time, that they have very good judgment about what should work not only in their city but also other places, and that their judgment is often as solid as the experts. Thus, they go home willing to



of cities rather than on the outskirts, and so much more. The mayors go back and change their cities.

Almost without exception, every mayor who attends the Mayors' Institute will tell you that those were the most valuable three days of their tenure as mayor. And almost without exception they will tell you that after the Mayors' Institute, they never look at their cities the same way again.

Mayors not only go back home to their cities more adept in the principles of good urban design, but they also become leaders in raising the level of public debate about proper physical development in their city. They become comfortable talking publicly about something they realize that they always cared about but did not think was a proper mayoral subject: the importance and need for beauty in their cities.

The concept of the Mayors' Institute has proven to be sound, but its success stems from Jaquelin Robertson, Adele Chatfield-Taylor,

challenge their traffic engineer or city planner, as well as the home town developer whose project is woefully out of scale or planned for the wrong part of the city.

American culture has not been one in which a passion for beauty and quality design in cities has been revered. Since we are the most urban nation in the world, this is a passion that our culture must embrace, and quickly. Because of the Mayors Institute, this passion has now been found in the leaders of cities in all fifty states, in cities of all different sizes and types. The mayors of America have become not only more skilled in the principles of good urban design, many have become their community's most articulate and passionate spokespersons for the quest for beauty in their city.

*October, 1995*