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The Mayors Institute on City Design

Preface

With the exception of the introductory articles by Adele Chatfield-Taylor and Robert Campbell the following material is excerpted from papers, talks and discussions that took place at several sessions of the Mayors Institute on City Design, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, Design Arts Program. Sketches are from the notebooks of Laurie Olin, except those of Olin and Sensenbrenner, which are by Allan B. Jacobs.

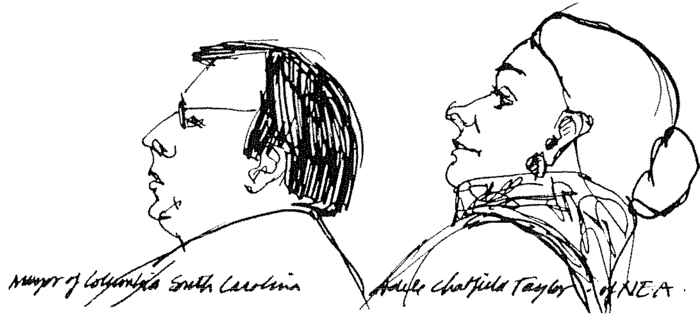
Adele Chatfield-Taylor

The National Endowment for the Arts sponsors The Mayors Institute on City Design as part of its mandate to foster excellence in, and access to, the arts in the United States. The Endowment's Design Arts Program is charged specifically with fostering design excellence and public awareness of design. We are concerned with nine design arts, all of which contribute to the quality of places and the artifacts within them: architecture, landscape architecture, historic preservation, urban design, urban planning, and interior, fashion, graphic, and industrial design. With the many demands on our program and the great range of design problems that we encounter, we must concentrate our resources on those design problems that are at once the most common and the most in need of fresh thinking.

Perhaps the most demanding of all the design problems we have in this country is the design of our cities. It is clear that as Americans we design some things very well—blue jeans, jet planes, computers, and running shoes, for instance. It is also clear that one thing we design less successfully is our cities. We simply do not think enough about cities in design terms. This is true for all types of places, from the smallest village that is in the throes of balancing historic preservation with modern expansion, to the largest metropolis that is attempting to rescue and rehabilitate its core at the same time that it is decentralizing. It is true also for the newest kind of city that is now filling up the countryside from coast to coast, a shapeless, leaderless type of development, which no one seems to understand or like, but which is engulfing us nonetheless.

A few decades ago, designers thought they were the only ones interested in the design of all these different kinds of places. Now, it seems every citizen is. Not every citizen may call it design, but everyone is able to point to bad and good examples and to name their effects. All speak of maddening traffic jams, the sudden disappearance of familiar buildings and landscapes, and the ugliness and overwhelming size of the new development that seems to spread as far as the eye can see. All speak, too, of the positive design features that we want to protect. We now want to savor those cities with distinguished historic or special architecture, or with natural assets like nearness to the mountains or the desert or the sea. We want to maintain, perhaps enhance, those towns and cities that we are used to, places too important to be carried away by the tidal wave of change. All speak, finally, of the need for growth, but for meaningful growth and not just more development.

We are at the end of a century in which there has been more loss of life and property than in other periods of history. There has been more degradation of the environment in the last 30 years than in the history of civilization, and more built since 1950 than between 1607 and 1950. As we think about this past century, we are at a turning point for the future.



So these issues suddenly are not just the domain of designers; they are the concern of everyone. Most important of all, they have become the concern and the responsibility of the central person in each city who can identify with the people who live there, and the one who has the leadership to direct the future. This one person is the mayor, who through his or her power to shape the environment, is the de facto designer of every urban place.

Mayors are responsible not only for the thinking and the vision behind city planning, but also for the construction and other implementation that actually turn thinking into design, and design into bricks and mortar. They may operate through intervening abstractions such as zoning laws, preservation ordinances, or tax incentives; but in their effects, mayors' decisions are design decisions.

Our experience is that good design need not take more money from city budgets, but that it does take more thought. Mayors must understand what design is all about so that it can be properly incorporated into the systems of business as usual.

It is because mayors often don't have enough time to focus on design—or may lack access to the designers who could help them—that the Design Arts Program created a new forum called the Mayors Institute on City Design. Our partners are The University of Virginia School of Architecture, the Jefferson Institute, and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Mayor Joe Riley of Charleston, in particular, called on the Design Arts Program because he and his fellow mayors have nowhere else to go to discuss the design issues or to study the design process. From the other side, designers have nowhere to go for information about the challenges that mayors face, challenges that eventually affect the city's design. Designers have nowhere to go to learn about the desire, the political mandate, or the demand mayors feel to do something for posterity. With the Mayors Institute, we aimed to provide a forum for both groups, the mayors and the designers.

Currently run by the Design Arts Program, the Mayors Institute works simply. Twice each year, spring and fall, seven or eight mayors and seven or eight urban resource people come together in an oval room designed by Thomas Jefferson in the Rotunda of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. In the beautiful setting of Jefferson's university, away from the demands of daily business, each mayor presents to the group an urban design problem from his or her city. They may not receive answers to their specific design questions, but all have a chance to learn one another's point of view. This exchange, we think, is the most valuable thing the Endowment can offer.

The Endowment commits itself to this effort because, of all the things we can do, sponsoring the Institute is one of the most important for encouraging design excellence for the long term. Each mayor is a person with a constituency and the ability to affect change. Their decisions are real, encompassing, and powerful. When one mayor leaves the Institute with a better sense of good design, that insight will affect thousands. For the Endowment, this is a significant and vital investment.

The history of design success in cities doesn't just have to do with good ideas, it has to do with that peculiar concatenation of people, a moment of time, willpower, and luck.

Jaquelin Robertson
Dean, School of Architecture
University of Virginia

(The following comments are excerpted from remarks made by Jaquelin Robertson, Dean of the School of Architecture, University of Virginia, at Mayors Institutes convened in October 1986 and April 1987.)

Every mayor and every business and every planner and agency should ask one another every week, what kind of town do we want? What kind are we likely to be able to have, given our location, conditions, and so forth? What are the physical characteristics of these wish lists that we make up? Because if you say that you want sunshine in the streets and lots of trees and you don't have those, there's a mismatch.

A first generic problem is size and limit, and many of us have talked about it. I think avoiding that issue is impossible. Definition and legibility—does the city have an edge? Are its entry points identified? Is there a center? When you say I have arrived in Norwalk, where have you arrived? What is the place that says this is Norwalk?

Feeling in the center or at the edge has a lot to do with density. How are the FAR [floor-area ratio] standards of your central business district arrived at? Are they based on population growth projections, special use, absorption rates, available empty land at the core of the city, paid-for infrastructure? Almost none are. But how would you arrive at them if they weren't based on that? What are acceptable and attractive residential zoning densities? Allan Jacobs and I have talked about this—15 to 30 dwelling units per acre? You know that you can do quite good things with 15 to 30, it's quite dense.

As important perhaps as anything that we talked about is the balance between the natural and the built worlds. I don't think in the United States you can have good cities without that balance between trees and parks and buildings.

And something we didn't talk about: public monuments and the ways in which cities commemorate and rewrite their own history over time. These are physically necessary for every culture.

The design of public spaces is the central design concern of architects. In the end, architects were intended to design cities. Buildings come very easily if you know what the design of the city is. It becomes impossible if you have no idea, because then it's just willful shape-making.

In short, the most desirable communities in the next 30 years are going to be those that know what they want and can put that down in easily understood laws that are extremely rigorous with respect to amenity and development and growth control, because the rest of the world around is going to be a wasteland of people savaging one another.

The City Is More than Contingent

Robert Campbell

If there is an essence to the Mayors Institute, I think, it is simply a belief in the primacy of the physical world. The Institute is an attempt to introduce a set of physical priorities into the thinking of a group of people—American mayors—who are conditioned to think of the world almost exclusively in terms of abstract, nonphysical value systems, especially those of economics, politics, and social welfare. It says nothing against the importance to our lives of those three disciplines to maintain that the physical world also exists with its own independent set of values. One can argue about what those values are or should be. The important thing is to recognize that they exist. The physical built world is more than the outcome and expression—the visible graph—of underlying abstract forces. It is more than contingent.

There is, of course, a reciprocal to this idea. If mayors, pressed by human and economic needs, can become blind to the physical environment, then designers are at least equally apt to get so fascinated by visual and sculptural games that they become blind to social realities. The larger purpose of the Institute is thus to bring together two subcultures—that of design and that of political leadership—in the hope that both can learn.

The mayors, from a designer's point of view, have proved to be extremely quick learners and extremely articulate people, although one can't tell how deep the learning goes or how long it is retained.