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The “Places 25” Symposium

Cassim Shepard

The “Places 25” symposium, held May 3, 2008, at the U.C. Berkeley College of Environmental Design, was part anniversary celebration, part design retrospective, and part brainstorming session on directions this publication might take. Like the best birthday parties, it commingled commemoration with concern for the future in ways that were both celebratory and critical.

Twenty-five years is a milestone that few design publications reach. Yet the purpose of the symposium was not simply to dwell on past success. The event was framed by two quotations from the writings of *Places*' co-founder and editor, Donlyn Lyndon: “Places are spaces that you can hold in the mind, care about and make part of your life”; and “places instill the choreographies of society.”

In opening remarks, Lyndon said he hoped the event would “test and extend these propositions.” Like the pages of the journal, he hoped it would produce “lively discussion of how valued places come into being, how they are designed, how they matter, and what we may all do to make places that nurture lives and enrich the public realm.”

Designing for Place

To set the stage, the symposium began with a series of reports on *Places*' history and recent activities. These came from William Porter, its founding co-editor; David Moffat, its current managing editor; and Lisa Sullivan, its current publications director.

The first morning panel began with a presentation by Robert Campbell, an architect and the architecture critic for the *Boston Globe*. Campbell based his remarks on two poems he had written about his grandparents' house on Lake Erie, both of which struck

notes of nostalgia and intellectual curiosity about place. Their processional sequences of imagery, moving from inner realm to larger environment, evoked an elegiac architecture of the imagination. Campbell's remarks also functioned as a call for the kind of thoughtful consideration of built form and social experience that has long been a hallmark of *Places*.

The discussion then turned to the presentation by their designers of buildings for various types of public assembly. First, the architect Peter Bohlin described Bohlin Cywinski Jackson's designs for the Apple Store, on Fifth Avenue in New York, and for the Teton National Park Visitor Center, in Wyoming. In entirely different contexts, the two structures explore the dynamic relationship between interior and exterior space. The work also did much to expand on Lyndon's epigraph, “places instill the choreographies of society.” Movement in the Apple store is upward, from a belowground retail space to a highly visible public plaza. At the Teton Center, it is through a perfectly proportioned courtyard, which gathers people before they enter a grand, log-supported hall where the beauty of the Tetons unfolds before them. In both cases the architecture uses transparency, concentrated mass, and carefully articulated detail to create paths.

The choreography described next, by Mark Simon—Centerbrook Architects' design for the Park East

Synagogue, in Connecticut—was also one of approach. Yet, fortunately, the design did not treat the building as a precious object so much as a simple place of worship and community. His methodology of “carving program” was particularly eloquent. It resulted in a vigorously shaped wood-strand canopy that hovers over the ark and creates an altogether memorable place, echoed by analogous forms elsewhere in the building.

To complete the session, Professor Elizabeth Macdonald of the University of California, Berkeley's, Urban Places Design Group, presented her work as part of a collaborative of artists in the design for a “Circle of Memory,” constructed of hay bales, to be installed in several museums. At each installation, the journey into and out of its central cylindrical space, where a steady fine stream of salt accumulated in a cone over time, created a ritual of movement that could be used to remember the deaths of children.

The projects discussed in the second morning panel were more urban in scale—campuses, streets, and towns. The standout for me—the most stimulating project presented—was a series of design proposals by the Oakland landscape architect Walter Hood for Center Street in Berkeley. Hood's work revealed a deep engagement with systems, natural and social, beyond the site in question. And the project was unique among those presented for its sensitivity to factors outside of the designer's control.

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The other presentations were also strong. The MIT architecture professor Stanford Anderson discussed the historic layout of the town of Aiken, South Carolina, platted in the 1830s by a local railroad, speculating in land for the construction of private summer homes. As a measure designed to promote health, the town featured extraordinarily wide rights-of-way where the pine trees were left uncut. Today these provide the city with a dramatic grid of linear parks.

The architect Frances Halsband presented her firm's design for a new pedestrian "green" linking areas of the Brown University campus, in Providence, Rhode Island. It highlighted the importance of boundaries, building character, and landscape in determining the sense of campus as a particularly memorable kind of public realm. She also explained how these same qualities informed Kliment Halsband's work on the small campus of Arcadia University in Pennsylvania.

Coming last, architect Mario Violic presented plans by Moore Ruble Yudell for a new building on the U.C. Berkeley campus, not two hundred yards from where the symposium was being held, to be shared by its law and business schools. The charge was to create a "forum" space, where expansion of the two programs could forge new connections. To accomplish this unity on a difficult, sloping site, they conditioned the shape and location of programmed areas on existing complex patterns of circulation on the campus around it.

The Place of *Places*

After the eight morning speakers, the symposium broke into small groups for lunchtime discussions directed at the journal's future. When the full group reconvened, six members of the *Places* editorial advisory

board reported on the substance of these brainstorming sessions. Topics ranged from the value of peer review, to the journal's engagement with international contexts, to the potential of digital delivery mechanisms for scholarly publication. Issues of audience, editorial agenda, and format were also addressed.

For a journal to search its soul in public, to question its identity as a forum for scholarship and professional excellence, reflects its commitment to remaining vital and relevant. But the crowd who remained for the afternoon session, some forty people or so, seemed largely composed of *Places*' loyal core of professional and academic supporters, rather than new audiences or design enthusiasts from other disciplines, biases, or institutional cultures.

Yet, despite—or, perhaps, because of—the palpable insularity of the afternoon session, the loyalty of this core group seemed to predict that *Places* still has a role to play in critical discussion of environmental design and the public realm. However, to maximize that potential, *Places* would do well to heed the advice of the plenary session: solicit international subject matter, cultivate a younger and more interdisciplinary readership, and respond proactively and innovatively to the possibilities of digital distribution and community-building.

Two final speakers, the U.C. Berkeley architecture professor Nicholas de Monchaux and former *Places* executive editor Todd Bressi, touched on some of these issues in their concluding remarks. Both tried to expand the frame of reference of *Places*' work to include the relationship of architectural interventions to digital culture and governance, two realms that are inextricable from serious conversation about design in the public realm today.

These presentations, in the context of all that had come before, led me to wonder about the role of design within the broader realm of environmental design. In that, the "Places 25" symposium was an enormous success: I left inspired by the range of solutions being applied to place-making, the attention to program, the responsiveness to human behavior. But I also left puzzled by the decision to address only factors under the control of physical designers.

The presentation of architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design at the symposium indicated that the role of place-makers is primarily to determine form rather than to interrogate the conditions that affect experience. Even the presentation of larger urban projects tended to privilege the singular authorial voice rather than analyze how design choices and processes interact with external forces and flows. This pattern begged the question: where were the scholars, artists, and urban planners? While the projects discussed exist in the public realm—educational, religious, cultural, and commercial—almost all were structural responses by designers to clear programs defined by clients.

Designs for the public realm that intervene in the network of relationships that govern legislation, generate revenue, or respond to demographic or socioeconomic change were conspicuously absent. Perhaps that is not the role of designers, who were the primary audience for the symposium. But it is certainly within the province of place-making, and I hope it will become a more central part of the future editorial agenda of *Places*.