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Urban Design and the Political Realm

Allan B. Jacobs

At the moment of decision to build or not build the Embarcadero Freeway along San Francisco's waterfront as an elevated structure, and thereby to block views of the landmark Ferry Building and its tower and to create at least a visual barrier between the land and the water's edge, the mayor of San Francisco understood and made clear the choices. He is reported to have said that he understood that while the proposed freeway would not be an attractive, aesthetically desirable structure, it was necessary to have progress; you couldn't stop progress and that the city had to move ahead. Some years later, in the mid-1960s, San Francisco had what some have referred to as the country's first freeway revolt. Voters made it abundantly clear that local elected officials in favor of extending the elevated Embarcadero and one or two other freeways would find it difficult to gain or hold office. In large measure, though certainly not wholly, it was the design quality of what had been built and what might be coming that was the focus and rallying cry against the freeway. (There were other issues as well: the effectiveness of freeways as traffic and congestion problem solvers was seriously in doubt, and their extensions were pointed toward a lot of middle-class homes as well as toward parks and toward more of the waterfront.)

Still later, in the 1970s, public policy was directed, and still is, to the removal of that freeway. Twenty to 25 years is not a long time in the life of a community.

So, there are periods in time when the design of urban places—that is, the physical arrangements of what we build and plant in relation to the quality of people's lives and their aspirations and in relation to the natural environment—are terribly important. Inevitably, when they are important, the design issues get played out in the political realm. Increasingly, it would seem urban design is more and more a public concern in U.S. cities.

Often urban design issues get entangled with social and economic concerns and almost always with what people consider to be quality-of-life issues. Often, too, it is the physical form issues that are graspable and imageable, things that people feel they can do something about. People may not feel, for example, that they can control the pace of economic development, or they may feel threatened by expanding commercial development or by ever-increasing traffic, all very complex issues, hard to deal with. But building-height controls, which may or may not have anything to do with these matters, are understandable and allow people to feel in control, and may be symbolic of the other issues.

In the early 1970s, San Franciscans put two citywide height control referenda before the voters. The issue was only partly one of height. Almost certainly it had more to do with the amount, pace, and scale of development. It is sometimes said that the historic preservation movement is in part a reaction to the pace of change, a desire to go



We don't look at that big scale. We call the planner to say, not, "What are we going to do with this area?" but, "How are we going to fix this street?" And this is the most important educational tool, almost, to teach this group of mayors when to call the planner.

Robert O. Cox
Mayor, Fort Lauderdale, Florida

I can't wait to get back home and start redesigning my city. In fact, and this is the truth, right after lunch I called City Hall and told my planning director, my director of community development, any plans or projects that were in process are now on hold until I get back.

Joe Daddona
Mayor, Allentown, Pennsylvania

more slowly, more deliberately. One way or the other, when they do arise, urban design issues can be very powerful, can be contested with deep passions, and are felt to be controllable in many respects by active citizens. Understanding that and planning accordingly—that is, engaging the issue as early and as clearly as possible—would seem to make sense.

Urban design as a city planning concern and as a political issue has been important in San Francisco since the mid-1960s. It remains so today. I use it as a case in point because I know it more intimately than the other cities and because the issues have been so clearly focused. Other cities, I am sure, could provide equally good examples. Perhaps the San Francisco freeway revolt was the first indication of a major concern of residents over the design of their community, albeit it was also linked to social concerns, to the prospect of people being displaced and to a growing mistrust of experts, particularly highway and traffic engineers. But it wasn't the only manifestation of that concern.

At about the same time, as the result of a citizen-initiated referendum, people voted to save the cable cars. Their continued existence was ensured by a new provision in the city charter. The period also saw two bulky high-rise apartments built on the waterfront, thereby breaking an unwritten rule that called for low buildings at the water's edge to ensure views of hills and water. The somewhat timid official response was a 40-foot

height limit for a small area along the waterfront. More noteworthy was the conversion of the Ghirardelli Chocolate Factory into a commercial center by an eminent civic-minded San Franciscan, proving the economic viability of adapting older, worthy buildings and setting off a wave of such projects across the country.

During this period, the city's official plans could fairly be described as classic, two-dimensional land-use plans with almost no reference to physical form or design. The staff was simply not oriented to design.

There were other design-related issues as well. If you sat, week in, week out, at zoning hearings, you could not help but hear the complaints about the new "plastic apartments" that were taking the place of more comfortable and better-built, older, usually less dense buildings. Density was a concern, more units replacing fewer, but so were the design quality and the placement of what was being built. There were, as well, increasing conflicts over major new development proposals, some, but certainly not all, in redevelopment projects. And when people felt they had been done wrong, they showed an increasing propensity to file law suits, dooming some projects and raising confusion in public policy circles.

It was in this environment, feisty to say the least, that the City Planning Department undertook what was to become its citywide Urban Design Plan. One selling point to elected officials asked to finance the work,

The real client is the unintended client, whether for buildings or gardens or cities; that is, it's not the person who writes the check and pays the bill and gives you the brief, it's the unintended public that 50 years afterward uses the product—they don't remember you, the mayor, the zoning ordinance; they don't care what your intentions were; all of that disappears. They live with the product. So never think that the end product of planning is the process—it ain't.

Jaquelin Robertson
Dean, School of Architecture
University of Virginia

Design of the Urban Landscape

Laurie D. Olin

to be done by the local staff, was the prospect of clear plans and proposals for design that might eliminate all those costly knock-down, drag-out fights over individual projects. In essence, that two-year undertaking was a plan to deal with the physical form and design of the city. It dealt with a lot of things that were clearly of concern to the people and some that the planners themselves knew to be important. Its subjects were the appropriate height and bulk of new buildings, views, color, preservation of historic buildings, city-wide landscaping and lighting, open space, preserving and honoring the natural environment, ways to ensure that new development fit in with the old, traffic at local, neighborhood levels, and more. The plan was clear, easily understood, attractive, and backed by a lot of very thorough, highly professional work. Perhaps more important, key elements of the plan could be easily translated into very specific legislation.

The plan met with overwhelming success and support. Indeed, the people's response was to challenge the planners to make the plan a reality, to follow up. Within a year, very specific citywide height and bulk legislation was passed, as were historic district designation and measures to prevent those plastic apartments. Rezoning also followed, and two years later the voters passed a major continuing funding proposal for open-space acquisition and development called for in the plan. This, too, was a measure initiated by voters, but one to implement a publicly prepared plan. For some

years citizens brought their copies of the plan to meetings and were not beyond quoting it, chapter and verse, sometimes to the chagrin of those who had prepared it.

The Urban Design Plan did not solve all of the city's design-related problems and concerns. Solving one problem can reveal others. Newer, more sophisticated plans have been necessary to deal with design issues that are directly related to people's comfort and safety, such as ensuring sunlight on sidewalks at the most important hours and slowing traffic at intersections. There is a more highly refined plan for the downtown, one in which design plays a major part. San Franciscans have voted on these matters, too, just as they have started to vote on measures related to the ultimate size of the city. Increasingly, we see citizen initiatives on physical form and growth questions in other cities as well.

To be sure, this matter of the physical form of the city, its design, is not of equal importance to the people of all cities. To some cities, such as San Francisco, it would appear to be constant and continuous, though one might wonder where the concern was in the 1950s. In other cities design is a sporadic issue. For still others, it may not be a concern at all or is lying dormant, to be set off unexpectedly.

When and where urban design is an issue, though, it can be very powerful, a matter of considerable passion, and certainly it will be played out in the political realm.

Landscape design, put simply, is the design of land for human purposes. It includes shaping the earth, manipulating land-form and its surfaces, shaping spaces, creating rooms outdoors, and using plants and architectural elements—all to form environments of various kinds.

At its simplest, landscape design consists of three activities. First is conservation, which has to do with what's there, what should be saved and what should go, and how to husband resources. Second is editing, which has to do with how to move things around: this would be nice, we'll keep it, but we'll move it over here. Then there is that troubling, terrible, most difficult part, invention: bringing to a place new things that have not existed there before.

The palette that we work with in our parks and gardens, in our plazas and squares, in our cemeteries and sacred groves, through time, is a very simple one, and very old-fashioned: just stones and earth, a few plants, water and the sky, things like that. It's a very archaic business: the construction methods are primitive compared to the rest of our society. We don't use titanium; we don't do strange welds with electronic devices. Yet it seems our choices are almost limitless.

Landscape design has, in the hands of its greatest practitioners, embraced the spectrum of human emotion and embodied the whole range of our aspirations, from delight and humor to ceremonial splendor, grief, and the honorific.

One of my favorite places is the Park of Sceaux, a French chateau now swallowed up by the suburbs of Paris. Here one encounters a very formal landscape, of Lombardy poplars planted in rows along a canal. Although it was built for people who held great power and maintained dictatorial control over their fellow men, today it is a people's park much delighted in by contemporary society. The order and structure of this landscape possesses a beauty and power that transcends its origins and enhances the life of everyone who uses it, whether they be ministers of a king and his court, or a couple of blue-collar guys fishing for pike on their day off.

The so-called informal or natural style has caused great confusion because it is really an invention, an artifact and an unnatural phenomenon. Parks designed in this style are gracious in their accommodation of our behavior; they provide rich and pleasurable settings for our lives, for courtship, for recreation, for rest and conviviality. They are so skillfully done that we believe they are natural, or assume they always had been there; we forget the effort that went into their making. So too with the restructuring of cities all over the Western world in the nineteenth century, the invention of the public realm as we know it. We forget that those great public works are really designs; we assume them.

Landscape design is an activity that can range from regional planning on the one hand, to the design of detailed parks and gardens on the

other. Landscape design has helped shape spaces that are shared by all of our citizens—what we call the public realm.

What would our cities be without parks? Their creation is one of the most optimistic acts of our society: the desire to bring natural elements into the heart of cities for health and for other social benefits is something that we find in the work of our nineteenth century ancestors. Our parks were created at enormous cost and with great energy, and often from leftover, marginal lands and wastes at the edge of cities. You couldn't go to social scientists and come up with a program for Central Park—Olmsted and Vaux invented it. There's a generosity of spirit, a social vision; not mere nostalgia for a lost pastoral era. There was a can-do attitude on the part of the city planners and politicians of the nineteenth century, who built most of the great public works that make New York habitable today.

It was Olmsted and his colleagues who further developed the concept of regional planning for park systems. Their famous Emerald Necklace in Boston exploited the characteristics of the region and linked communities and very disparate land uses with an interconnected network of roads, parkways, parks, preserves, forests, harbor islands, etc. It was a phenomenal invention, ahead of the urbanization that eventually infilled the entire region.

As cities grew, the forces at work became gargantuan, the errors

became more drastic, and the swings of natural forces moving through urbanization became more pronounced. Landscape architects concerned primarily with ecological issues began developing larger scale techniques that were less whimsical, less personal, less idiosyncratic, and more replicable. Ian McHarg, for instance, asked questions about where we should build and how we should conserve particular resources and how to maximize opportunities not only for development but also for the perpetuation of whole ways of life.

This generation of landscape designers started with the notion that the professional's first responsibility is to the citizenry, with the obligation to preserve life and to enhance the community's ability to function. In the last 20 years or so, there has been a great body of work concerning land and the conservation of land, which is, I think, profound—one of the achievements of our time. The Environmental Protection Agency, its requirements, and that entire list of things that our citizens now demand of their government in terms of the quality of the environment are fairly recent inventions.

Landscape design consists of many different activities. What differentiates it from other design disciplines is its focus upon the use and manipulation of natural phenomena and elements, of plants and people, of living things.

For instance, a large measure of the suburban dream we have created