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URBAN DESIGN TEACHING AND PRACTICE: A QUIET REVOLUTION?

Doug Kelbaugh

If conferences are any indication, interest in urbanism is waxing in America. A sabbatical this fall enabled me to attend five conferences on urbanism, community design and sustainable design, providing an unusual opportunity to check the temperature and pulse of several professional bodies simultaneously.

Judging from these events, the design professions and schools are ready to get serious again about urban America. After two decades of neglect (corresponding to the 30-year cycle of war, prosperity and reform that has uncannily repeated itself in U.S. history since the Civil War), schools are more interested in solving social than theoretical problems.

The most memorable talk at “Urban Design, Reshaping Our Cities” was architect Jaime Lerner’s review of urban initiatives taken while he was mayor of Curitiba, Brazil. This growing city of 1.5 million people may be shorter on capital than its North American counterparts, but it is longer on political will: Its expanding very-high-volume bus system carries 50 times as many passengers as 20 years ago, two-thirds of the city’s trash is recycled and the city’s green space has expanded ten-fold since Lerner took office.

The first Congress on the New Urbanism was convened a week later. As opposed to a conference, a congress is a

compelling idea in this age of exploding information. A congress tends to be serial, strategic and focused rather than open-ended, divergent and expansive. This invitational meeting of 200 people proved able to debate the fine points of urban design as well as to hatch the beginnings of a movement with an overt and heady political agenda.

If future congresses are to bury the lingering ghosts of CIAM but resurrect its spirit (the admirable and ambitious goal of the organizers) they should be open to a broader range of invited experts and, ultimately, to more members-at-large or appointed representatives of design professions and institutions. Closed meetings are effective and even necessary for developing an early consensus but, like the gated subdivisions that the new urbanism abhors, they are not sustainable in the long run. But as Andres Duany said, we must be mindful to keep strident debate in-house if we want to be more effective in the political arena than in the past.

“Sustainable Strategies for Community Design and Building Materials” was not as focussed. It spanned from the molecular to the planetary scale, from unsettling to frightening. Paul Hawken’s keynote talk pointed out, eloquently and correctly, that we don’t have a chance to survive if marketplace pricing of everyday products does not

better reflect their external costs, such as transportation, manufacturing, disposal and recycling. The market is a genius at establishing price but an idiot at figuring in true costs. This perspective should not be lost on our analysis of land development patterns.

“Building with Value” was not about urbanism per se; it directed the attention of some 400 architects and builders to more energy- and resource-efficient construction techniques. The surprisingly large product exhibit was truly consciousness raising. While the architectural academy has been splitting ever finer theoretical hairs, an entire industry of recycled and environmentally clean products has quietly taken root and is about to flower.

“Urban Leadership: Architecture in Service of Community,” was a show and tell about community outreach and civic values in architecture schools. Many of the presentations, most notably Ron Shiffman’s discussion of Pratt Institute’s Center for Community and Environmental Development, detailed community design centers and other forms of outreach. These centers have both survived from the 1960s and been revived in recent years in greater numbers than may be generally realized.

Civic values, however, must permeate design and planning schools in more pervasive ways than storefront

operations and topical charrettes; a general academic migration to loftier moral ground is needed. As John Meunier asserted, we need to develop and debate theory and ideology to clarify and undergird our urban overtures. This is especially true in suburbia, where rigorous typologies and paradigms are spectacularly missing, but less so in cities, where two millennia have arguably provided ample theory on how to create coherent places.

A New Era of Reform

If it is time to replay the 30s and the 60s, there are some differences. For one thing, the spirit of reform is more international. Green architecture, for instance, aspires to be a worldwide movement. Although fouling the planet is always of local origin, the results are increasingly recognized as consequential on a global scale.

Another difference is that the new initiatives in the inner cities, often on behalf of the disadvantaged, are driven less by a sense of social and psychological guilt than the initiatives of the

1960s. There is less *noblesse oblige* because rich and poor alike are beginning to realize that everyone is in this jam together. Joblessness, homelessness, air and water pollution, traffic congestion, crime, AIDS, lack of affordable housing and international competition cut across society. There is simply not enough time or money for society, the design professions or disciplines to solve these problems one at a time.

Fortunately, there is a growing consensus among architects, urban designers and planners about what to do — at least what to do about suburban problems. Admittedly, sprawl is an easy and fat target for social, environmental, planning and architectural critics. But what is also becoming clear is the economic albatross that it represents. Sprawl has been encouraged by decades of government subsidies, some obvious and some veiled (for example, fighting wars to secure stable oil supplies and cleaning up tanker spills). Suburbia is a very expensive proposition that artificially cheap energy and land has fooled America into thinking it can afford. Now state and local governments are

increasingly bankrupt; even the federal deficit may be more a product of the suburban economy than recognized.

Placemaking, townmaking and city-making should be our central mission. We need comprehensive approaches, rooted in place, to address society's chronic and interdependent problems. This strategy turns the government's modus operandi on its side — a 90-degree shift that addresses problems vertically rather than horizontally. A city might have a department of neighborhoods rather than a housing or social service agency, and the federal government might have a Department of Appalachia rather than (or in addition to) the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Lerner, for example, described how Curitiba gives people either food or transit tokens in exchange for bags of recyclable waste.

This place-specific, as opposed to problem-specific, approach represents nothing less than a sea-change in our way of making and managing cities. And, a society could do worse than to create good cities.

Seven Precepts of the New Urban Vision

There has been a quiet revolution going on in town planning and architectural circles over the last decade. Established urban design ideas are being stood on their heads. The new movement has taken various forms and names, but in general seeks to reform design and planning in ways that converge on certain basic principles:

1. A spatially coherent and cohesive sense of place, neighborhood and community that builds on what is locally unique and enduring must replace the anonymity of suburban sprawl.

2. Dense, more compact and clearly bounded communities that preserve open space, agriculture, natural systems and natural habitats must replace continuous, undifferentiated suburban development.

3. A richer and finer-grained mix of land uses, household and building types, and socio-economic groups must replace the single-use zoning that has spawned the monoculture of housing subdivisions, shopping malls and office parks and over-dependence on automobiles.

4. Walking, bicycling and public transit on an interconnected network of streets, alleys and paths that enhances mobility, connectivity, efficiency and health needs to replace the automobile for most trips.

5. Because their social, physical and institutional infrastructure is in place, conserving, revitalizing and infilling existing urban centers and towns needs to be given higher priority than building new communities.

6. The rekindling of the public realm, with face-to-face interaction in public places, must be given higher priority than electronically mediated reality (television, computer, fax, virtual reality, etc.) and to life spent primarily in privatized spaces (the mall, club, etc.).

7. Sustainable environmental, economic and cultural practices, traditions and mythologies must replace the commodification and consumption of natural sources and resources.