Urban Design and Its Relationship to the Comprehensive Planning Process

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•THE PROBLEMS of planning design and development confronting the cities of America today, when measured in social and physical terms, are vastly more complex and more difficult than those faced by urban societies at any other time in the history of the world. To understand the relationship of urban design to the comprehensive planning process, it is necessary first to clarify the contribution of a well-designed physical environment toward the fundamental needs and goals of urban society. A well-designed physical environment has a significant beneficial effect on the physical, psychological, and social health and welfare of people.

A basic question is what proportion of the total resources of a society can be invested in improving the design quality of the environment. To determine this we must first establish the relative value which society places on good design in the urban environment in relation to the achievement of other specific goals such as safety, convenience, mobility, efficiency, economy, and general functional utility of the environment. It appears to be necessary to attach quantifiable measurements to the degree of achievement of beauty, plasticity, and clarity of form. Does society today really care whether or not we have beauty in our environment? If society does care, what price is it willing to pay for the achievement of a physical environment humane in quality and beautiful in aspect as well as efficient in function and economically sound in operation?

There has been in the last few years inadequate understanding between those interested in physical planning and development and those concerned primarily with the social services and with human resources programs. The significance of this divergence in professional attitudes is directly relevant to the discussion of how urban design should relate to comprehensive planning. The basic question, I believe, is this: How can design-oriented physical planning and development contribute to the welfare of society? Can there be a good life or a great society in a dilapidated, disorganized, dangerous and ugly physical environment? We would not be engaged in urban design at all if we were not convinced that a good environment relates directly to the goals of a good society and unless we believed that a good physical environment is a fundamental requirement of a good society. We must continue to explore and specifically identify the interrelationships between the basic physical, political, economic, and social aspects of urban change. The physical planner and the design planner are receiving increasing support from the psychologist in identifying the beneficial influence of well-designed urban space on the quality of urban life.

As an observer and student of American cities, I have been impressed and inspired by the uniqueness of the natural setting and of the natural characteristics of the physical sites of many of the cities of America. I have admired the beauty and historic richness which is such an important heritage of our cities from coast to coast. I have been concerned by the failure of American cities to achieve a coherent overall metropolitan development pattern whether in the New York region, Miami, Chicago, southern California or on Puget Sound. Because of this I have been pondering the contrast between the uniqueness of the natural setting of our great cities and the sameness of the man-made patterns. Only where the terrain has shown marked characteristics of

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slope or coastline, as in San Francisco, Boston or Washington, D. C., does one feel that nature has somehow prevailed in spite of all that man would do. And yet there is a compelling quality in the situation and landform in so many of the great urban centers. If no two city sites are really alike, why should not these great cities be also unique in their man-made characteristics? Is it not our responsibility to work constantly toward the goal of having each city become its own best self, a sensitive response to a unique setting, rather than an expression of uniform mediocrity?

Ian Nairn, an English journalist and critic, described the urban scene in America as

> . . . an endless proliferation of every kind of artifact without purpose, without pattern, without end. The landscape is a melange of diners, gas stations, subdivisions, a few battered farms and fields, motor car dumps, motels, supermarkets, quite literally for miles on end. Cleveland to Sandusky, fifty-nine miles; Providence to Boston, forty-three miles; Riverside to Los Angles, fifty-four miles.
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> The fragmentation of all relationship to life and environment has already occurred and the silent main of universal anonymity and mediocrity comes flooding in behind them, and the survivors do not know what has happened. I hope in the name of all the splendid things in America, that I am wrong.

I hope that in all of our cities we will in the future prove him wrong, although today we recognize harsh justness in much of his indictment based on what met his view across our land.

During the past ten years there has been a growing interest in organized research in the developing field of urban design, environmental design, and community architecture. Most archiects recognize now that architecture is more than the design of individual buildings. The architect I. M. Pei has said, "A city, far from being a cluster of buildings, is actually a sequence of space enclosed and defined by buildings." This thought is the essence of urban design. A most encouraging aspect of the advance of growth and understanding of urban design is the increasing volume of well-oriented research on the subject. In a recent article, "The City as Environment," published in the Scientific American, Kevin Lynch has stated that the physical form of a city has a sensuous impact that profoundly conditions the lives of its people, and this is often ignored in the task of city building. Lynch identifies four major physical deficiencies which today make large cities less than satisfying as places in which to live. First is the excessive stress of the city including noise, uncomfortable climate, and polluted air. Second is the lack of visual identity of the parts of the city which has lead many critics to speak of the vast dull gray areas extending for miles without relief or variation. Third is the illegibility of cities; the lack of a favorable relation of one part of a city to another, the general incoherence contributing to a sense of alienation. Fourth is the rigidity of the city, its seeming rejection of human activity instead of the stimulation of a wide variety of pleasurable activities.

These four points, I believe, represent in general terms the reason for the present indifference or hositility of urban dwellers to their evironment. The evident alienation of large numbers of people in the city can be measured in terms of a mounting disaster already approaching crisis proportions: social maladjustment, delinquency, crime, growing mental disorder, lives warped by poverty and neglect. This evidence of increasing social disorder is out of all proportion to the reasonable expectations of the world's most affluent society. Lack of employment, often reflecting lack of education and lack of skills, and the resulting poverty are basic causes of much of the human suffering in cities. These problems must be solved as a prerequisite to the creation of a great urban society. We must take the position that the blight of poverty can be overcome in the world's wealthiest nation, that the design of a beautiful physical environment can contribute to human dignity, self-respect, and the sympathetic response of man to his natural and man-made environment. It is

here that creative urban design comes into play as one of the essential elements in comprehensive urban and regional planning.

Urban design has become an essential activity in comprehensive urban planning as a basic planning tool to combat the blighting effect of a monotonously uniform and regimented urban environment on the lives of city people. Encouragement of creativity and human individuality is difficult in an environment of urban squalor.

In the American city the places where people spend most of their lives are those places where society has all too often created confusion and visual blight. It is inconsistent to expect civic pride and appreciation of creativity and human individuality if we deny children and adults beautiful surroundings. To believe that beauty is essential and that it will leave lasting impressions on the minds of children and adults alike, to stop feeling apologetic about attempts to fight spiritual hunger, to stop trying by computers to justify every item of expenditure intended to add beauty to the city—these will be long steps toward the creation of beautiful cities. The faculty of imagination is the principal source of human improvement. To appreciate great music one must hear it. To appreciate beauty one must be exposed to beauty.

Cities must recognize creative design as an essential component of comprehensive planning, as important as any of the other basic elements of the ten point program which is a part of the standard metropolitan area land-use and transportation plan. These basic elements are: (a) economic factors affecting development; (b) population; (c) land use; (d) transportation facilities including those for mass transportation; (e) travel patterns; (f) terminal and transfer facilities; (g) traffic control features; (h) zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, building codes, etc.; (i) financial resources; and (j) social and community-value factors, such as preservation of open space, parks and recreational facilities, preservation of historical sites and buildings, environmental amenities, and aesthetics.

Urban design has been the subject, during the past ten years, of extensive research, experimentation, testing, and modification. There has been increasing acceptance by the design professions in many cities of the need for urban design. However, regrettably, many city planners and highway planners, understandably preoccupied with an already long list of complicated planning requirements and demands relating to the orderly development of cities and metropolitan regions, have not accepted this new and at times seemingly obscure responsibility. Only a few of the 225 standard metropolitan areas which are now conducting land-use and transportation studies are undertaking an orderly investigation of urban design as a heretofore missing element in a comprehensive regional planning program.

There is a fundamental and compelling need for the development of pioneering studies of the role of comprehensive visual design in the preparation of city and regional transportation and land-use plans. The Detroit region has proposed such a study as a part of its comprehensive transportation and land-use study. Detroit has had the benefit of several years of experience with an urban design study, as a part of the Community Renewal Program. This study has produced a design concept for the heart of the metropolitan region, an inner city area of approximately 20 sq mi. This study has placed in logical context an analysis of the historical and physical characteristics, the natural and man-made design resources, the design framework, including present and future land-use patterns, and circulation patterns and the basic exploration of all those factors which taken together will determine the quality and characteristics of form and space in the inner city. A fundamental objective has been to create a clearly articulated urban image, making conscious use of a well defined system of open spaces, a coordinated circulation system of freeways, major thoroughfares and local streets, and a pattern of architectural focal points in the establishment of what has been called a comprehensive skeletal design concept for an inner city which will accommodate up to one-third of a million people. Thus, a design based on the foregoing will replace the present poorly articulated assemblage within the central 30 sq mi of the city of some 1,500 isolated blocks averaging less than 5 acres each. The design framework acknowledges the all-important role of the Detroit River as the principal natural design feature, forming the basic pattern of the comprehensive freeway system in the inner city, which sets boundaries for, and provides access to,

large-scale planned land-use areas, including a proposal for two new towns within the inner city, each designed for 100,000 people, a central business district, a strong institutional corridor accommodating a medical center, the cultural center, Wayne State University, and a multiple-use commercial and residential axis along Woodward Avenue. The comprehensive design plan provides for the recovery of much of the blighted riverfront area for recreational and residential uses as well as for model industrial parks and comprehensive port facilities.

The articulation of the image of the inner city will be accomplished basically by the interaction of the three major form determinants: the circulation pattern, the open-space pattern, and the architectural pattern relating major focal points and major use areas to each other and to the entire inner city area. The elements identified in Lynch's research on the image of the city find expression in the Detroit urban design study. The paths range from freeways to neighborhood pedestrianways, edges range from the predominant waterfront along the Detroit River to the boundaries between the residential and industrial districts. Clearly defined nodes such as the skyscraper towers of the Central Business District and of the New Center Area are complemented by the towers of Lafayette Park and Elmwood Park and those proposed as visual features of the future centers of the new inner cities of Forest Park and University Park.

The total effect of the design of Detroit's inner city will be to overcome the four basic deficiencies referred to earlier: (a) perceptual stress leading to confusion; (b) lack of visible identity of the parts of the city; (c) general incoherence and lack of relation between one area and another; and (d) the monotonous rigidity and resistance of the city to free and varied human response.

The design developed for Detroit's inner city area, we believe, goes far toward correcting these ills: discomfort, lack of diversity, rigidity. A most important lesson learned in the past three years of developmental urban design work in Detroit has been that design, in the hands of sensitive architects, landscape architects, and urban designers, has contributed on an equal basis with the established standard elements of comprehensive planning such as the economic-base study, the land-use plan, the circulation pattern, standards for public facilities (schools, parks and playgrounds) and location relationships for specific functions (special purpose commercial, industrial and institutional areas). Urban design also helps to define the relationship of the housing cluster, the residential neighborhood, the community with its center and its clearly defined boundaries, to the entire city. In an extended period of cooperative effort occasionally marked by well-founded conflicts and disagreements, it has been amply demonstrated that creative design can hold its own in a comprehensive process of survey, research, analysis, and synthesis in relation to the more traditional planning justifications and rationale based on functional criteria and quantitative measurements. The experience from this inner city study in Detroit leads us to the hope that the redesigning of the urban landscape will become in this generation the greatest public art, and that it will be no longer limited to the central city renewal area alone, but will embrace the total Detroit metropolitan region with a projected population of eight to ten million people by the year 2000.

A specific and detailed study of environmental design quality which should be a central feature of a continuing investigation of community goals and values, and an essential basis for the regional plan, will include as a minimum the following major objectives:

1. Examination and analysis of the region's historic development in sufficient detail to understand the natural and man-made resources responsible for shaping the three-dimensional form of the region.
2. A visual analysis of the significant natural and man-made features of the region to utilize these resources to their full potential as enrichment and focal features of the visual region. Steps to preserve these features during future urban expansion or development will require specific study.
3. Creation of an organized regional design framework recognizing the visual and spatial implications of existing and potential design resources.

4. Clarification and strengthening of the visual form of the region by developing a plan which will make the major natural and man-made features of the region as well-structured, distinct and geographically far-reaching as possible.

5. Development of an open space and recreation plan incorporating significant areas of natural beauty, ample public recreation areas, and generous rights-of-way for connecting parkways and service drives.

6. Development of a regional freeway, highway, and scenic route plan of such quality and vision that it may become the most essential man-made feature in the entire regional development effort. Such a highway plan must be viewed as a major form determinant in assuring sound structure to the total comprehensive regional design plan.

No city can be planned as an abstract two-dimensional "zip-a-tone" pattern on a map and expect to be less flat than the paper on which it is drafted. No city, however naturally flat its terrain, can suffer its essentially two-dimensional character of street pattern and land-use pattern to be dealt with apart from its third dimension without isolating its architecture from its site. No town or city can be great, let alone even good in design, if its two-dimensional pattern is conceived as a land-use and circulation plan alone, however efficient those arrangements may be.