

Public Realm: The New Makers Handbook
by Michael A. Von Hausen

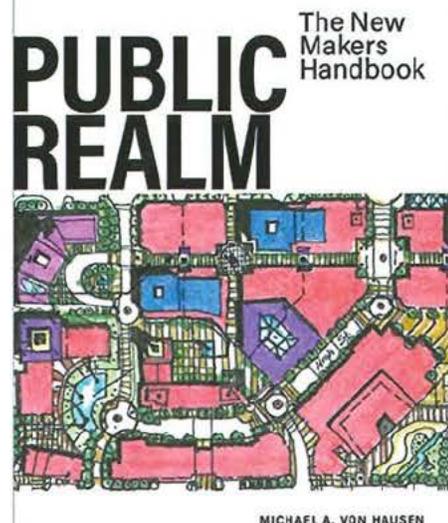
Review by Don Alexander,
Retired Member

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201 pages, no ISBN number.
The book is available from
mvhinc.com or Amazon.

"Von Hausen gives a comprehensive list of detailed strategies for creating successful places & offers his reflections on how & why certain places have been able to be created."

Public Realm: The New Makers Handbook is Michael Von Hausen's ninth book. Dedicated to his students at Simon Fraser and Vancouver Island Universities, it will be of value to already-practicing professionals and students. Sumptuously illustrated with Michael's own photos and drawings from numerous case studies, this book is pithy, compact, and inspiring as it distills forty years of urban design experience into a relatively slim volume. Von Hausen's practice, while mainly concentrated in Western Canada, also extends to other parts of the country, the U.S., Russia, China, and Mexico.

He begins by introducing key concepts in urban design – distinguishing between space and place, the importance of creating networks of spaces and places, the issue of scale (from larger to smaller), the continuum from central to local, and the transition from public to semi-public to private space. He then discusses key urban design principles, including using the public realm to foster community; viewing public spaces as the glue that holds communities together at a variety of scales; daring to be visionary, while being aware of the obsolete barriers that block the transformation of public space; and taking advantage of activist



organizations like Project for Public Spaces to spearhead and inspire change in the public realm.

Von Hausen very clearly articulates the need to get rid of dead spaces – usually shaped mostly for the convenience of cars – such as vast parking lots and big box stores that tend to possess blank walls on three sides. The resulting 'blandscapes' are usually lacking in character and are virtually indistinguishable from one city to another. To bring vitality back to our cities, he argues that we need to re-enthron the pedestrian. While he is not uncritical of the various Western European public spaces he looks to for guidance, he finds much to learn from their example. Indeed, perhaps one defect of the book is that it is a trifle Euro-centric, though von Hausen's practical experience extends to other cultural contexts. He is also concerned about the prevailing suburban uniformity in many parts of North America; communities that lack a diversity of housing types to serve a variety of income ranges and very often lack a well-developed tree canopy and adequate community and commercial facilities within walking and cycling distance.

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The next section of the book examines new imperatives for how we approach the design and retrofitting of the urban realm. He challenges us to not only identify what issues face our communities, but how we can approach them differently, asking:

- How do we deal with COVID-19 and future pandemics?
- How do we encourage social inclusion?
- How do we avoid people – especially seniors – being isolated at home, both from a health and a social point of view?
- How do we configure the built environment to promote adaptability and resilience in the face of climate change?
- How do we ensure that a multiplicity of human needs continue to be addressed as we densify our cities?

- How do we integrate nature into the urban fabric and stop privileging cars to the detriment of other users of the public realm?

Von Hausen questions the implications of increasing international migration and devotes two dense pages to the issue of equity, followed by a brief history of urban development in the Western context, from ancient Rome to modern urban sprawl.

In one of the most valuable parts of the book, von Hausen lays out the key ingredients of successful urban places, with examples – vibrant streetscape design, a multi-modal transportation system, and an emphasis on accessibility and safety. He follows this with useful, specific recommendations, emphasizing that amenities should exist for all groups and that attention be paid to urban ecology, for instance, by

restoring ecosystem function and habitat spaces. He also suggests the importance of cultural expression, from Chinese seniors practicing Tai Chi in parks to annual festivals like Caribana or Gay Pride.

Von Hausen gives a comprehensive list of detailed strategies for creating successful places and offers his reflections on how – and why – certain places have been able to be created. The book ends with two appendices filled with additional useful technical information. Overall, this is a superb book for new and experienced urban designers alike.

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