Urban Design Workshop: Designing For Smart Growth

by Alex Taranu, MCIP RPP and Moiz Behar, MCIP RPP

The OPPI Urban Design Group (composed of Moiz Behar, Dan Leeming, Anne McIlroy, Trevor McIntyre, Alex Taranu, Sonny Tomich and Steven Wimmer) organized an urban design workshop at the CIPOPI Conference held in Ottawa in July 2001.

> Enhance the area's identity by locating visual landmarks at the important points, using a variety of gateways and streetscape treatments, and placing public art at major locations;

> Create a network of open-space systems that promote year-round usability and provide variety, diversity, and connectivity.

The groups produced six development concepts and focused on specific issues or areas of the site. While the participants had the same general approach, the concepts offered specific design solutions for land use, massing, character of the development and public spaces, open space and linkages.

Recommendations for implementation included the development of a long-term concept plan for the physical development of the area, as well as general-use zoning that is driven by urban form through urban design guidelines.

Lessons learned

The site proved to be complex, presenting opportunities related to infill and intensification, transit-oriented development, and creation of public space. It was a very good example of the challenges of "urbanizing suburbs.

The OPPI Urban Design Group is aware of the limitations inherent in such a constrained event. Still, it was encouraging to see the development of so many ideas, and the creative involvement of all participants. It was also interesting to note that, while searching for alternative solutions for specific issues or areas, the six working groups followed similar approaches and arrived at similar conclusions.

The site area is comprised of 100 hectares and includes a transit station, a major post-secondary institution, a civic centre, a large amount of retail space, some recently constructed office buildings, as well as low- and medium-density residential development. The developments are car-oriented, and are served with wide roads and large amounts of surface parking. Despite the official plan provisions applicable to the area, the current development patterns show dispersed land uses with no clear street and open-space linkages between them.

The groups agreed that in order to realize the area's full potential, it should be conceived as a mixed-use centre, with gateway treatments at several key points to emphasize it as a major urban node.

They agreed upon the following principles:

> Introduce residential uses throughout the area in a variety of built forms (high- and mid-rises, townhouses), as mixing uses will bring life to the public spaces around the clock;

> Reduce car usage in the area by expanding and improving access to the transit system, and by creating pleasant, safe pedestrian and cycling routes;

> Introduce new local streets and mid-block connections, thereby reducing the size of the blocks and creating a fine grain of built form;

> Create a "sense of place" by promoting a variety of public spaces: streets, squares, and plazas, framed by consistent frontages;

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