Back to the Future?

Relearning the Tradition of Civic Design

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Lance Berelowitz enters a plea for rethinking what planners do and how they do it. His challenge to current planning education and practice entails a "back to the future" proposal to relearn our tradition of civic design.

Lance Berelowitz propose aux urbanistes une réflexion sur ce qu'ils font et sur leurs méthodes de travail. Il remet en question la pratique et l'enseignement de l'urbanisme en suggérant un "retour vers le futur" qui réinvente l'esthétique urbaine.

Professional ordering and civic disorder

As we enter a new millennium, disorder ordering and civic century and examine our collective efforts to create truly urban settlements? It is not a pretty sight, in my opinion. Despite all these efforts, our cities, especially in the "New World," have not become noticeably better. Indeed, many have declined as things of beauty and expression of human achievement. Why such a comparative failure of planning, and how might we resolve to do better? Something very strange happened quite early in the twentieth century, something that had profound consequences for the subsequent planning of our cities. We became narrowly "professionalized" planners - part of a spree of professionalizations - and in the process we seem to have lost or surrendered the civic sensibility to imagine and inspire memorable, compelling forms of urban space.

Civil engineering trumps city crafting

I submit that we lost our way as town and city "crafters" when the break occurred between physical town planning and policy planning. Occurring to varying degrees across North American academia and practice, the main consequences were the increased specialization of professions and the decline of the generalist. In particular, as our planning personas split in two, we saw the rise of landscape architecture as a distinct profession, and the abdication of our former stewardship of the public realm to ever more powerful civil engineering professionals. While there is, of course, nothing wrong with landscape architecture's emergence as a distinct profession, its disconnection from the traditional education of planners (especially with regard to the civic context), and its increasing marginalization by the ascendant engineering culture of the past half-century, has meant that most of our cities are now being designed not by planners or architects, but primarily by engineers. If our cities look and function more and more like huge machines, it is engineers who deserve credit. Engineers do what they do very well, but their training is not in civic design, which involves skills that were once central in the training of planners. And city-making is about more than just the "hard systems" functions that engineers legitimately claim as their field.

The art of power and the power of art

Cities are, or at least historically have been, a reflection of our collective culture and aspirations. At their best they reflect the highest order of aesthetic composition of which we humans are capable: the city as a work of art. They are also indubitably a reflection of power, and of course our most treasured Western examples (think Venice, Rome, Paris, Vienna) are largely that way precisely because they were manipulated by very powerful individuals. However, the examples of memorable civic design left to us by the likes of Nash, L'Enfant, Haussmann, Cerda, Sitte, Burnham and Olmstead, while certainly expressing the intent of their powerful patrons, are also great urban projects. It is very difficult to imagine today who among us has the skills to match these "master planners."

Resolving planning's predicament

I am not, of course, advocating a return to autocratic or despotic rule. However, when we survey the actual results of our recent efforts as city shapers, surely we as planners must have cause for reflection on how disconnected our profession has become from the reality of built consequences. Planners have, to a large degree, become managers of process, and have lost the ability to translate individual ideas and collective rules into meaningful forms of development. We look to others to give form to the vision, and find ourselves increasingly in a reactive role, with limited skills to posit alternatives to what is delivered by colleagues in other disciplines. We should not be surprised if the results are less than inspiring. What might we resolve to do about this?

Zoning out

The ascendancy of zoning as a key planning tool in recent decades is a perfect illustration of the Law of Unintended Consequences. Though developed with the best intentions after the First World War, the ever-increasing use of zoning by planners as an exclusionary device, proscribing almost every aspect of urban settlement, has resulted, in many North American cities, in such sterile environments (not to mention social dysfunction brought on by the rigid segregation of land use) that it has become its own worst enemy. Where flexibility, adaptability, propriety and inclusiveness were hallmarks of cities past; our contemporary urban centres struggle to rearrange themselves in the face of human nature. So much is "against" the rules.

Relearning civic design

Planners are no longer trained in the arts of civic design. A large part of planning education now has to do with process - a development again inspired by the most laudable of intentions. We now quite rightly demand accountability, and have come to believe in bottom-up decision-making, to value democratic inclusiveness over top-down "master planning." In my view, however, the balance has shifted too far. We have become prisoners of our specialization, blinded by process. I propose that we reintroduce to our profession those skills and fields of knowledge that actively contributed to the creation of the world's great cities. Call it what you will, but planners need to be taught again how to visualize urban form: they require the timeless techniques of scale, proportion, harmony, perspective and spatial composition - the techniques of civic design. My hope, as we settle into a new century of city-making, is that our profession will find the will, and recognize the urgent need, to learn again the techniques of what Gordon Cullen called "townscape" or Frederick Gibberd referred to as the "Urban Scene." As Gibberd wrote almost fifty years ago, "Town design embraces architecture, landscape and road design, and these arts being so embraced lose their individual identity to become a new thing, 'the Urban Scene'." If we are to imagine and help realize urban scenes in the coming century as inspiring as those of past centuries, planners will have to embrace again these noble arts. Let us resolve as a profession to re-learn the tradition of civic design.