

Working Cities: Density, Risk, Spontaneity

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Cities reflect social and cultural norms as well as economic and technical means. They are also expressions of belief and will. The current state of our cities reflects much about our time: mobility, governmental policies, technical shifts, race relations, materialism. Notwithstanding the continuing growth of suburbs and their attendant "edge cities" there is also evidence of a renewed interest in our older cities. Urban redevelopment is being driven by a number of factors, from retooling of the local economy to creative re-use of former industrial districts. While this redevelopment is welcome in any guise, contemporary urbanism in the U.S. betrays tendencies that are antithetical to true urban regeneration because they don't deal with the whole city.

We are witnessing the **suburbanization** of our cities through the replacement of multi-family dwellings with single family homes and row housing. This makes inefficient use of the existing urban infrastructure and impairs the ability of neighborhoods to generate the local commerce that distinguishes walking cities from car-dependent suburbs.

Our cities are undergoing a process of **sanitization**, an effort to redesign complex urban environments with a narrower palette pitched to bourgeois sensibilities. New York City's Forty-second Street, for example, was not only a sleazy precinct but also an entertainment center for working class kids. The redevelopment sponsored by Disney may make tourists more comfortable, because it is so familiar, but at the cost of the city's messy realism.

Urban regeneration is often propelled by the **gentrification** of working class districts into expensive upper middle class enclaves. This process is frequently attended by cultural cleansing and the withdrawal of support systems for people of low income.

There is a palpable **fear of risk** in current American culture that wants to make everything safe and predictable. As a nation we are ambivalent about the very diversity we value. The success of the ersatz townscapes at Disney World's Epcot and Universal Studios' CityWalk confirms both our attraction to and fear of close encounters with other cultures. The city offers the possibility of the unexpected, even shocking, encounter.

These phenomena reinforce the **consumerism** that is the bedrock of our national economy and ideology. They manifest an imbalance in spending on private as opposed to public amenities, an

emphasis on consumer products instead of buildings and places. The shopping mall and festival marketplace remove the agora to privately owned and controlled settings. Government policy favors the private automobile over mass transit despite the cost in congestion, pollution and personal injury. Budget surpluses are targeted for tax cuts rather than improved services and environments.

We may participate in a global society but we live in geographically specific places. A list of what makes good cities is fairly obvious, encompassing physical, economic, social and environmental elements. But in U.S. cities these elements are rarely applied with equal resources and commitment to the vast areas inhabited by the majority of people – **working people in need of working cities**. I speak here of quality housing, schools and libraries; of reliable and efficient municipal services; of properly funded and maintained public transportation; of parks and playgrounds. In poorer neighborhoods these essentials of decent living are too often inadequate. Because there is a high correlation between poverty and race in our cities, this burden falls disproportionately on minority groups.

Transforming a city to serve all the people requires a shift in values, attitude and will. America is rich enough to be able to make choices and create the city that reflects our goals. What will it take to create a working city? An emphasis on ordinary buildings as well as the exceptional. A focus on the public realm and systems. Increased emphasis on the visual quality of the environment. A merging of the disciplines of architecture and urban design. A shift in government priorities to support desirable land uses and urban systems. Support for the local economy, including the informal sector.

Cities must be well designed. Urban populations will only grow significantly if cities provide services, amenities and an attractive physical environment for all people. For poor people cities offer opportunity, for artists and dissidents they offer freedom. For all they present the possibility of social interaction and cultural growth. These qualities have been intrinsic to cities throughout history and explain why people still flock to vibrant urban neighborhoods. The range of possibilities offered by cities is also why our urban future does not reside in a risk-free bourgeois vision but in a denser more broadly based model of a pluralistic, dynamic and public urbanism.