

The Urbanization of Suburbia: Context, Theory and Design Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses ways in which a sense of place can be established and community supported through the selective and thoughtful urbanization of suburbia. Historical models of meaningful places and urbanity are described, critical inquiry regarding the contemporary built environment presented, and characteristics of successful and livable urban centers discussed. The appropriate transformation and application of theoretical and urban context strategies in suburban centers is presented through case studies of junior level projects from the College of Architecture and Design at Lawrence Technological University.

INTRODUCTION

Just as the crowded and unhealthy conditions of the English and American Victorian city resulted in utopian and garden city movements, today's suburban environment, with its wasteful, car dependent sprawl and banal and unsightly lack of place, prompts us to re-consider the city. By the city I refer to the vitality, density, diversity, sense of place, public orientation and facilitation of community that urbanism has traditionally provided. The appropriate translation and application of these characteristics in suburban areas can strengthen existing centers and transform our ubiquitous automobile-dominant sprawl.

For the past two years my junior level design studios at Lawrence Technological University have rigorously addressed contemporary suburban/urban issues. The following is a discussion of considerations regarding the contemporary built environment explored in the context of the studios. Four avenues of inquiry comprised the educational methodology. The first was to consider the timeless elements that have traditionally created and defined place and community. The second was to recognize recent and contemporary patterns of development and note their reasons, cost and effects. The third was to research substantial, timely and appropriate alternatives and approaches which serve to foster healthy, sustainable and viable urbanity. The fourth was to develop these approaches through "real" student projects, in a subur-

ban setting that already possesses a modicum of urbanity.

PLACE AND COMMUNITY

Human orientation and identity is contingent on our sense of belonging to a place. As Christian Norberg-Schulz states "The place is the concrete manifestation of man's dwelling, and his identity depends on his belonging to places." It is a place where we are from, a center which is differentiated from others. To be meaningful, a place needs to possess an "imageable structure"¹ that gives its inhabitants a sense of belonging and connection. Moreover, identifiable places have meaningful content and provide the setting for individual and group interaction.

Architectural settings have traditionally provided for these needs. These fundamental environmental and spiritual needs are perhaps changed and diminished today, but still remain essential to a sense of identity and well being. Traditionally religion, sacred space, mythology and ritual have been deeply rooted in the definition of place. According to Mircea Eliade, meaningful places or centers served to differentiate the "sacred" from the "profane." It was the place where the gods were present and the setting for communal activities. One's existence was always directly related to specific places and their identity and meaning. The architecture was created with the knowledge that the experience of meaningful places profoundly affected one emotionally and spiritually.

Our modern perspective insists that contemporary humans are significantly different from our recent ancestors. This myopic conceit ignores the similarities between our basic social needs and responses to our environment with those of our more distant predecessors. Our bodies are virtually the same and much of our social behavior originates from our primitive past. According to Carl Jung our psyches are "not only of today," but are a result of the legacy of preceding generations, a thread of interconnections woven back into the fabric of time. One important timeless aspect is an undiminished need for identifiable places to serve meaningful social interaction and communal participation.

Alex Krieger states that "In an age of instant communication and mobility it is easy but wrongheaded, to assume that physical proximity is no longer essential for urbanity."

CONTEMPORARY PATTERNS

Our contemporary built environment is more often described as lacking discernible centers and places. As James Howard Kunstler states, "there is little sense of having arrived anywhere, because everyplace looks like noplac in particular." (sic) It is a landscape that is characterized by sprawl, and which has been built according to the dictates of our dominant transportation system, the private automobile. The result is the predominance of fragmented and isolated enclaves, and a paucity of true public spaces. The street, traditionally the place of commerce and social interaction has been reduced to a conduit between the separate entities of home, shopping, recreation and work. Pedestrian access and transportation choices have been marginalized and the use, function and population of our cities and towns has become increasingly segregated. The disturbing phenomena of gated communities and "edge cities" eloquently encapsulates these patterns and their broad ranging societal implications.

Contemporary patterns of development have been attributed to the global communication and transportation revolution of the late 20th century, but this is only partially accurate. For example we have learned that our increasingly dysfunctional built environment is predominantly the result of specific transportation subsidies, and development laws and practices. It is not simply the result of *laissez-faire* "natural" market forces which therefore represent "what people want." It is the result of very specific codes, laws, transportation, economics and attitudes. Even if it were a natural reflection of our needs we can no longer afford it socially, politically, economically and ecologically.² It is ironic that a country defined by notions of personal freedom has created an environment of limited mobility which serves to segregate our society by age and socioeconomic status. The family budget is increasingly devoted to paying for their automobiles, and our communities are disproportionately burdened with the cost of maintaining roads, infrastructure and services. As we relentlessly continue to sprawl, more and more farms and open lands are lost, and the health of our water and air declines.

Moreover, our built environment's relentless assault on our senses compels us to retreat psychologically and become passive. We structure our environment, but it in turn structures us. Analogous to the dialectical interrelationship of culture and language, our environment possesses a depth of content in terms of national identity. It is a legible symbol system that succinctly tells us "who we are" - our values, beliefs and priorities. Michael Sorkin argues that dispersed suburban enclaves are antithetical to a free society and that "the effort to re-claim the city is the struggle of democracy itself." Christopher Lasch in his last book *The Revolt of the*

Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy writes about the loss of true public discourse and its implications regarding the practice of democracy. The "sprawling, amorphous conglomeration without clearly identifiable boundaries, public space or identity" that he describes is attributed to the balkanization and polarization of society. According to Lasch as the "privatized classes" retreat from public life behind their gated enclaves, or in their rootless mobility, democracy and its institutions are put at risk.

RESPONSES AND STRATEGIES

Contemporary theoreticians such as Peter Calthorpe, Margaret Crawford, Mike Davis, Andres Duany/Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Harrison Fraker, Doug Kelbaugh, Alex Krieger, Daniel Solomon and others argue for the transformation and urbanization of suburbia. The aim is not to eliminate the automobile, but to integrate a diverse range of transportation, commerce, business and residential needs. As in Calthorpe's Transit Oriented Developments (or Pedestrian Pockets), public transportation is an essential component. Additionally, the strategy is not to limit growth in particular areas which often leads to sprawl elsewhere, but to control it in ways that fosters density, diversity and community. In this regard local and regional zoning and planning laws, as well as street improvement subsidies and traffic engineering standards, need to be addressed. Successful strategies include a coalition of urbanists, developers and environmentalists. This, according to Calthorpe, provides a synthesis of problems for common solutions.

The arguments for the urbanization of suburbia are based in part on the premise that successful and viable urban environments are created by a straightforward response to timeless qualities of human community and interaction, and appropriate application of traditional urban precedents. This is not a nostalgia for past forms and symbols, but timely responses and strategies that satisfy essential human needs in the context of their contemporary setting. The result is full-time communities that are inclusive not exclusive and that provide a healthy balance of public and private places. Privacy is created by interstitial spaces not barriers, security by streets that are inhabited not guarded. Because people participate in their community there is a sense of ownership and care.

The principal characteristics of these new or revitalized urban centers are as follows:

1. Diversity of use, population, accessibility, economics and transportation.
2. A discernable sense of place and public identity which includes a clarity of center and boundary demarked by civic places and buildings.
3. Pedestrian scale and accessibility accomplished in part by narrow streets with short cross walks. Pedestrian use is facilitated through traffic slowing and by humanly scaled architecture, signage, lighting, and planting.
4. A mixed-use commercial core with a dense concentration

of business, commercial, civic and residential buildings that maintains and engages the street edge.

5. A "downtown" area served by public transportation with adjacent residential areas within walkable distances.

THE PROJECTS

At one time Detroit was one of the largest cities in America; now its population stands at less than one million, many of them poor. Woodward Avenue, once the grand boulevard of Detroit, epitomizes the city's decline — miles of abandoned buildings, empty lots, loss of any sense of meaningful place. Looming over its sparse downtown is Renaissance Center, intended to revitalize Detroit's downtown, but now functioning like one of many self-contained corporate fortresses that ring the city. It is the city that evolved according to the economics and dictates of the automobile. Contemporary Detroit and its suburban environs are defined by sprawl, auto dependence, and lack of place. It is characterized by borders, edges, separation, economic and racial segregation, fragmentation and defensible enclaves. It offers a striking example of suburban settlement patterns run amok, and contemporary attitudes about urbanism. Too often in Detroit and throughout America "main street" is not "almost ok" but is a physical structure that deftly supports unequal, discriminatory and divisive social structures.

However, interspersed among the miles of freeways, corporate enclaves, and faceless strips and housing tracts of the Detroit environs exist pockets of urbanity. Royal Oak, a small city located just outside Detroit's border, offers a striking example of a community struggling to provide a meaningful and humane center. It is a popular place, known for its restaurants and "street life," and people drive here from the surrounding suburbs to sit in its cafes and walk its streets. The Royal Oak environs however is still principally suburban with its attendant fragmentation. The small in scope, upper level student projects which are set in Royal Oak's "downtown" respond to, and build upon, the modicum of urban fabric that exists there.

Four projects to date have been set in the downtown area of Royal Oak, all of which were included in a recent public exhibition entitled "Community Visions of Royal Oak." The show provided a public forum for a generally interested and moderately informed community. Hopefully it also set the stage for future projects which will more directly serve the needs of the city. Past projects included a congregate housing/mixed-use development and a museum that included commercial spaces and artist housing. The following is a discussion of the goals and methodology of the most recent two projects which were entitled "Threshold, An Urban Rail Station for Royal Oak" and "Place and Occasion: A Performing Arts Center for Royal Oak."

The goals of the projects were first of all to introduce the morphology and experience of a viable urban environment. Most students have not experienced urban environments, and often have not been sufficiently introduced to issues of

urbanism, though they are from junior level design studios (second year of architectural design). The projects emphasized certain "traditional" approaches to urbanism, but were not mimetic or romantic. "Traditional" does not necessarily mean revisionistic, nor does it preclude timely and evocative architecture. Urbanity was the principal focus of the studios, but because they are student projects they also included other educational goals.

The educational methodology of the studios included precedent, context and theoretical exercises. Precedent studies of each project's specific building type as found in urban settings were researched. Context studies included drawing and model exercises to document the range of public space and the scale and texture of Royal Oak.

Theoretical exercises were utilized to identify fundamental issues related to both formal and social relationships. Their emphasis was the interrelationship of elements and patterns as opposed to formal objects. In the rail station project an exercise entitled "A Place of Meeting" identified certain relationships and asked that they be conceptually expressed. These issues were related to the building type and the location of the project site at the edge of the principal entrance to the downtown area. The project description was as follows:

Construct a 1' x 3' relief, material collage that conceptually addresses issues of threshold, limen, border, meeting, interaction, convergence, interpenetration... Aim to evocatively crystallize aspects of one or more of these relationships. The palette of materials should be limited to 2-4, can be new or found, and may include wood, plywood, metal, screening, cardboard, chipboard, nails, bolts, xeroxes, spray paint...

The performing arts center project utilized an exercise entitled "Speaker's Corner." The projects were site specific and concluded with a performance in situ. Their (not so hidden) agenda was the notion of the value of taking possession and care of public spaces. The project's description read in part:

At the corner of Hyde Park near Marble Arch in London is a place called Speaker's Corner. Here on Sunday mornings, in a tradition which dates from the 19th century, anyone may publicly speak. It was established by the local government of its time as a place for public gatherings and debate - a service it still in part performs. Often a simple podium serves as a stage for political or otherwise orations - inevitably with audience participation. Today it often takes the form of marginal political performance; street theater of sorts.

Open societies and communities have traditionally depended on the freedom to publicly debate issues, present ideas, entertain - often in simple urban settings; street corners, squares, the public green... Imagine a place in Royal Oak to fill a similar need and in the spirit

of Speaker's Corner construct a stable platform that will place you a minimum of 18" off the ground. Any materials are acceptable but aim for a limited, appropriate palette. Consider issues of materials, craft and tectonics. The materials may be finished but not painted.

The project will conclude with the "installation" of your project at a chosen site in downtown Royal Oak. Work in pairs for this part of the exercise. Identify a place and create a 1 - 5 minute performance that evocatively utilizes your platforms and responds to their specific setting. The performance may be a dialog or separate monologs. The subject may be politics, folk tales, humor, tragedy...

Once the preliminary studies were completed, urban strategies were developed in concert with the architectural design. These strategies emphasized the elements of viable urbanity previously noted and included the following:

1. Mixed use, density, and economic and social diversity.
2. The street as a community room, positive public space, street edge, and pedestrian scale and access.
3. Public transportation, urban edges, thresholds and centers, and meaningful civic identity.

The rail station project served to introduce the students to issues of public transportation and its implications regarding civic identity. Its site at a prominent entry point to the downtown serves as threshold to Royal Oak. The building program included commercial spaces, a restaurant/coffee bar, a station hall, and a public plaza, and addressed their implications regarding public space and pedestrian access. The necessity of a "kiss and ride" drop off area and short term parking required the accommodation of the automobile. The project was integrated with urban and landscape design studios to comprehensively address urban issues. The project description was as follows:

Our culture emphasizes, glorifies and one might say worships communication, mobility and transportation. Indeed, our age may come to be historically defined by these terms. However, our dominant mode of transportation, the automobile, is with the exception of local travel, slow, wasteful and primitive. Conversely, air travel efficiently links major metropolitan centers of America. Urban-sub-urban, regional, inter-city rail systems are needed, though, for shorter, more frequent journeys. A re-vitalized rail network can serve to strengthen our urban and sub-urban centers, and especially in the case of high-speed trains, provide a truly modern means of transportation. Moreover, rail stations can become touchstones of shared civic identity and pride, as well as providing meaningful symbols of modernity.

Rail stations have traditionally served as shared, public thresholds, as places of meeting, passage, transi-

tion, and interconnection. The project is for an Amtrak commuter and long distance rail station for Royal Oak and will focus on these theoretical issues as well as site, context, program/use and organization. The new rail station will serve as a formal threshold to the center of Royal Oak, as well as providing connections to Detroit, Pontiac, Chicago and other Amtrak destinations. The site is on Main Street in downtown Royal Oak. The program will include a station hall, platforms, a restaurant/coffee bar, commercial spaces, public toilets, ticket windows, offices and other support spaces, landscaped exterior public spaces, and a short term surface parking lot. (A long term parking lot is located adjacent to the site.)

The performing arts center project was an addition to a small working theater located at a prominent site in the downtown. It addressed issues of placemaking and civic identity, public space and social interaction, and the appropriate application of technology. The project description read in part:

The communication revolution of the late twentieth century has served to interconnect humans to the extent of profoundly altering our collective world view. However, with all the benefits of the "global village" have come the attendant fragmentation, dislocation and loss of meaningful places. The technologies have all evolved from the human capacity and need to communicate. The fundamental human need for group social interaction remains undiminished in contemporary society - we need definable places to meet, socialize, touch, to see and be seen... Performance in its multitude of forms, from the re-telling of a folk tale to grand theatrical productions, has typically served this human need. It is a place for communal ritual, enacted both by the actors and by the audience.

The project is for a performing arts center for downtown Royal Oak and will focus on these archetypal and paradigmatic issues as a point of departure. The performing arts center will serve as a place of public gathering and meaningful social interaction. Additionally, the studio will question ways in which technology may more significantly and appropriately support timeless human needs.

All of the student projects, oriented toward the qualitative and the experiential—less so toward the quantitative and the abstract,⁴—included regular site visits to reinforce the issues of successful urban environments. They emphasized a range of approaches and strategies which responded to the exigencies of the site and program and each student's theoretical interests. Ultimately they were more concerned with asking substantial questions than with providing convenient answers. During the semester the projects covered many of the issues necessary for meaningful and successful urban cores. The intent was to expand the students' perspectives so that they may critically observe and respond to their

environment in appropriate and positive ways.

CONCLUSION

When the post World War suburbs blossomed in America they provided an option to the city and the country, as they still can do today. However, if we lose the city due to fragmentation, and subsume the country due to profligate sprawl, then we will be left with no choice or diversity at all.⁵ Moreover, radically changed demographics and the resources necessary for the development and maintenance of suburbia make it an increasingly marginal option. Alternatives are desperately needed for a world that is dramatically different from 40 years ago. We may not need radical change, even if that were possible, but simply a broader range of choices that serve more of our population.

The need for change is apparent and yet we find ourselves in an interval between the realization that the old ways no longer work, and the discovery of new patterns. This is characteristic of a transitional time, which Václav Havel describes as follows: "I think that there are good reasons for suggesting that the modern age has ended. Today, many things indicate that we are going through a transitional period, when it seems that something is on the way out and something else is painfully being born."⁶ In many ways we don't know what to do and thus the plethora of debates within architecture as to its role and responsibilities. Too often this results in paranoid and arcane debates that suggest a profession without a center. Our perceived impotence to effect positive change has resulted in a professional placelessness of sorts. Often the debate is polarized between nostalgia for the past and passive acceptance of the present. Both approaches by utilizing selective criteria and information are inadequate. We need a middle way that recognizes archetypal human needs, responds to our contemporary milieu, and perhaps anticipates the future. We need to synthesize traditional patterns of human habitation and social interaction with contemporary issues of suburbia and urbanism. Lastly, it is essential to reestablish a proactive social agenda

toward the creation of place and community in our built environment that can be rigorously tested in student and professional projects.

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FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Norberg-Schulz's term
- ² See Calthorpe, Peter., *The Next American Metropolis*, Princeton, Princeton Architectural Press, 1993
- ³ see Venturi, Robert, Scott Brown, Denise and Izenour, Steven, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Cambridge. MIT Press. 1977.
- ⁴ Norberg-Schulz, C., *Architecture: Place and Meaning*.
- ⁵ See Krieger, Alex in his introduction to *Towns and Town-making Principals*, New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1991.
- ⁶ "New Age Journal," (Sept./Oct. 1994)