GOOD CITIES VS. GREAT CITIES

A conference on "The Role of the Arts in Urban Redevelopment" suggests any number of topics for a keynote address; but one obvious theme is that of the "Hawaiian Missionary."

The families of the 19th Century missionaries who went out to proselytize the Hawaiians ended up owning the islands. It was said of them that, "They went to do good, and they did very well indeed!" "Doing good while doing well" could also apply to those buildings that contribute to the delight of the public and the "bottom line" of the developer.

Ever since John von Neumann, the father of Game Theory, pointed out that, while some people think of life as a "zero sum game" in which any benefit is at someone else's expense, we have come to realize that in practice, it can be a "positive sum game" in which everyone wins!

Our national experience in urban development is a prime example, especially over the past two decades during which an increasingly sophisticated public has shown itself not only willing, but eager to pay a premium for beauty and amenity, for buildings that represent not just construction, but architecture, that do not merely occupy space, but fill it exuberantly, dramatically, and for the benefit of all of us!

Worthwhile buildings are sought, and worthwhile urban context as well, leading to cities that aspire not merely to be good, but to be great.

And we are coming to understand the difference.

Great cities are not only "showcases" for culture, but incubators of it; they make provision for the talented, energetic, ambitious young in every field who supply the adrenalin in our civic system.

A great city of the 20th century would have a crowded, bustling, contagious sense of energy, excitement and human interaction— instead of strangling congestion, choking traffic, swarming sidewalks, blocked sunlight and cut-off views. It would contain buildings that function well for their occupants and owners, but also relate well to the streets they face, the neighboring buildings and to the city as a whole.

A great city presents a coherent and civilized environment, a blending of old and new, a distinctive sense of character and of place. A great city permits a street life of human scale, with opportunities for chance meetings of friends and colleagues, for agreeable experiences on the way to or from one's place of work, at mealtime, or at odd moments during the day. It would have vistas, where a surprise sight of a park or square, a public monument or a grand building brings a sense of delight that might be uncommented upon but that brightens the day.

A great city vibrates with vitality that comes from variety—variety of ages, occupations, activities, and conditions of life, in many cases with different people doing different things at different times of day or night.

A great city represents a certain symbiosis and synergism, with permanent residents, transients and visitors reinforcing one another, with neither blue collar worker, "yuppie," entrepreneurial tycoon, government worker nor professional manager dominating or constricting the life of the city, but with all contributing to its quality of life.

A great city boasts public buildings that express community rather than power, buildings that don't shout "Hey, look at me!" but that are appropriate for a particular time, place and function.

A great city exudes a zest for life and serene self-confidence.

It knows what to do and how to do it.

We are increasingly coming to understand the wisdom of appropriate public encouragement of, and involvement in, desirable private development efforts which might not take place without public intervention.

In such a climate, relations between the private sector and the public sector could become cooperative rather than adversarial, as they are so often today. The public sector might have to become more aware of what the private sector defines as "the discipline of the marketplace" or the "time-value of money"; the private developer might have to become more conscious of what economists and planners call "externalities," or the impact of our actions on third parties. It could mean that public figures would be encouraged to consider development problems not only from the standpoint of short-term politics, but of long-term economics as well. It may mean that aesthetes would consider the social impact of their designs; that social engineers would be forced to face hard economic problems flowing from their decisions; that planners would have to ask themselves, "Who bears the risks and the pains of failure?"; that architects would focus on the comfort, safety, and efficiency of the occupants of their buildings; and that all of us might relate more directly to the success of the project.

The vehicle for such activities will increasingly be a de facto partnership among municipal government agencies, the private developer, the private institutional lender and other entities such as cultural institutions.

We will need to create means by which risks and rewards are shared, by which each partner has a vested interest in the success of a project, and by which the benefits that flow from it are appropriately apportioned.

For example, the provision of expensive structured parking and major infrastructure costs must be seen as joint problems requiring joint solutions.

Such tools as tax-exempt bond financing (to the extent the federal government will continue to permit it), or subordination of real estate taxes to mortgage financing charges, practices such as partial application of tax loss sales proceeds to development capital (once again, at the pleasure of Washington)—must be rethought and used imaginatively.

Each historical era has its characteristic problem resolved by a characteristic solution. In the years ahead, working out the ground rules for successful accommodations among public sector, private sector, financial institution and cultural institution partners deserves our best thinking.

Why? Because the game is clearly worth the candle!

It is not necessary to dwell on the benefits to the private developer, because developers as a sub-species have finely-developed economic antennae and, like ants at a picnic, will intuitively zero in on a good thing.

Developers do not require exhortation to perceive the economic advantage of bonuses for plazas, atria, etc. from a physical point of view, or the higher rents they can charge for a prestigious building as opposed to a mundane one.

Government functionaries and the general public, on the other hand, often do not fully understand the dynamics of urban life, the complex factors that make some cities wax and others wane, that make some cities bubble with vitality and others bore to tears their own citizens and the occasional visitor.

Some factors that affect the "tone" of a city are obvious, such as an exciting array of shopping opportunities, restaurants, hotels and recreational facilities and, of prime importance, major cultural institutions, art galleries, theater districts and the like.

Other factors are often not apparent, however:— a sound economic underpinning; buildings and public places that are "user-friendly"; areas in the city that surprise and delight and perhaps even astonish; "walkable" areas that invite rather than repel the pedestrian; cheap and available housing for bright and ambitious youngsters from elsewhere who come to seek their fortunes; varied neighborhoods with differing characters; the pace and tension of a 24 hour-a-day cosmopolitan center and a vital cultural life.

Sometime before he became President in 1960, John F. Kennedy was heard to comment that Washington, D.C. was a major national capital strategically located between our North and South. "And look what we have," he is reported to have said, "an intellectual backwater with southern efficiency and northern charm!"

Today, when Washington, D.C. is discussed as reaching world-class standing in the ranking of cities, references are made to block-buster art exhibitions like "The Treasure Houses of Britain" by-passing New York to come directly to the National Gallery's new East Wing, or to leading international ballet companies, orchestras or plays going directly to the Kennedy Center without stopping further north.

When residents of Houston or Atlanta wish to indicate the eminence of their respective home bases, they point to their new art centers, just as Australians from Sydney speak proudly of their world-famous opera house or Edinburghers refer to their Festival.

Conversely, Brasilia or Canberra, although capital cities of major nations, attract the attention only of those who have to go there. In a recent Sunday N.Y. Times, a full page discussion of "What To Do In Brasilia," implied that foreign visitors fly to that massively planned, immensely expensive capital of South America's largest country early in the morning and leave by nightfall, but that (in the words of the Times), "24 hours or even 48 hours is preferable to avoid a mad rush."

Can anyone imagine that being said of Paris or London, New York or Rome?

The implied questions are fair ones. What would Brasilia need to achieve "world-class" status; and what would, New York have to lose to suffer a drop in its standing?

A gradual but perceptible change of status between San Francisco and Los Angeles may be instructive.

The mood of San Francisco is seen as increasingly "anti-business." In the words of The New York Times, "business and civic leaders are beginning to question whether the city will continue as the center of business it has been since the Gold Rush more than 100 years ago… the Los Angeles area has been growing rapidly as a center of business and finance, sometimes at the expense of San Francisco. . .relations between business people and San Francisco City Hall have reached a low point."

The cultural balance also seems to be shifting. Observers are beginning to think of San Francisco like Kyoto or Florence—a gracious and charming place out of the main stream of life.

My own conclusion is that the business leaders who lead and support our major cultural institutions are municipal assets and should be treated as such.

We have learned a lot about what makes cities tick, but one lesson that we tend to forget is that no city ever became great or stayed great without a solid economic base.

We have been talking of great cities, but it might be worthwhile to close with a thought-provoking image of an ideal city for the 20th Century.

This ideal city might have a relaxed and civilized meeting place like Venice's Piazza San Marco; a bohemian intellectual center like Paris' Left Bank; parks like Boston's Public Garden or New York's Central Park, with London's Hyde Park Speakers' Corner and the book stalls on the Seine near Notre Dame.

It might have the business dynamism of Wall Street; the elegance of the Place de la Concorde; the sparkling waterfront life of Sydney Harbor; the imagination of Boston's City Hall, the street activity around the Pompidou Center; the sophisticated complexity of Rockefeller Center; the relaxed graciousness of San Francisco's Telegraph Hill; the majesty of Beijing's Forbidden City, and the nobility of the Acropolis.

Good cities we have; the ideal city eludes us, although a vision of it should guide us. Great cities are within our grasp if we will them and are willing to pay the necessary costs.

And in such process the Arts will lead the way.

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