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In Pursuit of Place

by Sam Newberg

Henry Beer, a principal with the Boulder, Colorado-based design firm Communication Arts, talks about ways to make design inclusive.

You have said that when places reflect the authenticity of their human inhabitants, then what they look like is less important than what they communicate about the person.

Design is a two-edged sword. Designers tend to design things to death, and there is no room left for the actual participants. It is like so much of contemporary art and modernism: the work is so complete that there is no room for the visitor or the observer to insert their own sensibilities. Every great piece of art is enduring because everyone who looks at it comes away with something different. Somehow, the artist found a way to leave those entry points available for a sense of ownership. The same is true of architecture. When you look at a building or experience a place that you connect with, it is because the creator enabled that. Most art and architecture today exhibits the quality of being completely indifferent to the viewer. The creators couldn't care less whether it connects. What is more important is the self-expression of form or quality of place or the building, which is the great failure of modernism. It is hermetic. It is exclusive, not inclusive.

Themed restaurants, for example?

Well, the experience is so thoroughly designed, and so thoroughly created that there is really no room for your own sensibilities, for your own overlay. You are never going to form an enduring connection. I really believe that the purpose of art and the purpose of design is really the attempt to connect people to the sublime. I know that sounds sort of high-minded, but why not be high-minded? That requires the creators to subsume their own self-interest to a larger sensibility. That is the real challenge.

A lot of the time it seems that some of the really great places out there are not necessarily designed with the intention of making people experience the sublime. It just happens, even in the most ramshackle places.

We like to call it messy vitality. You can't apply the blunt instrument of uniformity to the entire culture and expect people to be satisfied. We are trying to design for the part of the culture that Richard Florida calls the "creative class." You have to get some initial response from people at the forefront, and then secondary people follow afterwards, picking up on that trend of those ideas.

However, you can't spend your whole life designing for urban pioneers because there are some things that resonate with them and some that don't. Your portfolio needs to have some clients that are genuinely interested in architecture, but also needs to have a larger, more predictable sector of the population—like your stock portfolio needs to be predictable and reliable, but a portion has to be risk takers.

Give examples of places that got it right.

Soho got it right. Soho is a really interesting case where benign neglect created the possibility for all sorts of reinvention. Don't forget that Soho grew into what it is today by having people not paying much attention to it. This provided flexibility for urban pioneers. Parts of San Francisco have happened that way, too, like South of Market. Lots of interesting things have happened in the absence of regulation because anything is possible. Restrictions are not always so good. By having a fear of something bad happening, you obviate the possibility for something wonderful.

I don't believe in even visual zoning codes. I believe in a set of principles and setting some end statements, and then getting out of the way and holding your breath. Development is like any other part of life—there is risk and reward. And yes, the risks are great, but the rewards can be extraordinary. You take the risk out, and nothing very exciting is going to happen. The difference between experience and sensation is unpredictable outcome. That is what makes life wonderful.

We as designers are flattering ourselves to think design is purely the reason for the popularity of places. The only people who see a place are design professionals. Human beings are experiencing places at the tertiary level. If a place is warm and safe and comfortable, they drift toward it, and if it is not, they drift away. If something is so explicitly contrived, people know it.

What do urban designers need to be doing better going forward?

A lot of the problem is systemic—way upstream from what designers control. You look back at when great cities were created, and the people had great spiritual lives and couldn't help but express that in their cities. And when you have a society whose religion is money and capitalism, it is hard to build good cities. Don't forget that anyone who thinks community is a quality that can be engendered by porches and sidewalks is out of their mind. Community comes from interdependence, and when people live in a culture where they don't need each other, you're not going to have community. Adding porches and sidewalks is like putting on a cowboy outfit and thinking you are a cowboy. You get community when people genuinely need each other.

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