The Importance of “Cookies”

by Ric Stephens

There are four enduring philosophical questions:
Where did we come from?
Why are we here?
Where are we going? and …
Where are the cookies?

Although not the most weighty of issues, the search for “cookies” is the one that occupies most of our thoughts and demands most of our efforts. What are these cookies? They are quite simply the little things that make life enjoyable: the mint on the pillow in a hotel room; the series of green lights in a long commute; the joke relieving a tedious speech; the illustrations in a technical document; and even actual cookies served at a meeting.

There are also cookies specific to planning. They include the water fountain in the park; the seating in the plaza; the kiosk on the street corner; and all public art anywhere and everywhere.

Yes, we must address the “enduring planning questions” of public health, safety, and welfare within the context of our comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances. These are important, and must be given our fullest attention and consideration. But I would suggest that we also consider asking “Where are the cookies?” Where are the small pleasures that make the urban environment a more exciting and enriching place? They are not to be found in the description of residential density or the ordinance on street standards.

David Sucher is author of the widely praised City Conforts. His book provides a veritable bakery for community design “cookies.” To take just one modest example: his suggestion to “have a drink on us” – that is, to provide public drinking fountains. But when providing them, to also remember, as Sucher notes, that “truly comfortable water fountains would welcome people in wheelchairs with a cantilevered drinking-spout and children with steps.” In other words, paying attention to the design details.

When I asked Sucher about the value of such small-scale amenities, he explained that “what planning commissioners might like to remember is that while the macro-scale of comp plans and zoning codes is important the impact of such high-level documents can be helped or thwarted by the details, the cookies, of implementation. Where the phone booth is located (I guess that dates me!) and how long the ‘walk’ signal gives you to cross the street are what we experience every day.”

If we look at how we enjoy places, it really has much more to do with these simple elements than the overall scheme of land use hierarchies and circulation patterns. These small urban design features, sometimes called delicate details or memory points, form lasting impressions that create a sense of place, time, discovery, and more.

Great places have many and varied cookies. There is a clever fountain in Glendale, California surrounded by frog sculptures that spit out jets of water. It provides a delightful and popular place for kids to play, and has quickly become a well known community icon.

On the other hand, I worked on a city master plan years ago that specified all citrus trees should have inedible fruit. There was concern over liability issues related to the public picking and eating of the fruit. So, these incredibly sour oranges would simply fall to the ground and rot until collected by city workers. And ironically, people still tried to eat them not knowing they were bitter. Well, that’s how the cookie crumbles.

On my drive to work the other day, a flock of geese walked single-file across a busy road. A line of bemused and amused motorists patiently waited as they crossed one-by-one without the aid of a crosswalk or signal. It was an example of an extraordinary “cookie” without having been the result of any planning. And yet, we can plan for public art, edible landscapes, urban wildlife, and many more urban design features.

Interestingly, someone who has made a career of selling actual cookies (Mrs. Debbi Fields) fully understands the experiential aspect of cookies:

“I’ve never felt like I was in the cookie business. I’ve always been in a feel good feeling business. My job is to sell joy. My job is to sell happiness. My job is to sell an experience.”

We should ask ourselves “What aspects of our community provide the simple pleasures that enhance the urban experience?”

Good urban design is about experience – sensory, mental, emotional, and in some cases, spiritual. We may never know the answers to the enduring philosophical questions, but we do have the ability to answer the question “Where are the cookies?”

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