

Urban Design:

A PLACE IN PLANNING

by Brenda Lightner

For some time now urban planning has been the realm of statisticians, lawyers, zoning administrators, and municipal engineers. Recently, however, there has been a pronounced move back to what clearly is the origin of the impulse to plan: the appearance and "legibility" of the physical form of the community. Perhaps it is because many of us are dissatisfied with our physical environment — at least the part that's been built in the last forty years.



Typical "Main Street" has legibility, despite the varied storefronts.



Today's commercial strips leave us wondering about the order of the space.

Although convenience stores, strip shopping centers and fast food chains are clearly popular, their looks and the overall character of the town that they create make us yearn for good old Main Street. People are beginning to ask for a less chaotic, and

more appealing public environment. There is a growing awareness that the quality of the physical setting is an important element of the quality of life of a place. This is where the planners and the planning commission get involved.

Producing a beautiful or even orderly town is a tricky problem, especially from the perspective of a local planning commission. Sometimes we carry around an ideal town in our heads: for many people this is the place they grew up, and for others, it is a place they have visited, like Nantucket, San Francisco, Paris, or Santa Fe. To solve the conflict between our ideal vision and the reality of our cities and towns, some planning agencies have begun to formulate urban design plans which seek to capture the collective vision of their town or community.

The connection between the collective ideal or vision — even if you have one — and the weekly act of sitting in the planning commission meetings and ruling on a zoning variance can be very tenuous. Sometimes important decisions about physical character are beyond the traditional scope of planners, for example, the design of highways, or the location of major utilities. Even when these actions lie within the purview of the planning commission, they are difficult to decide on aesthetic grounds: economics, land use conflicts, law, safety, and politics usually come first. Yet, it is the sum of the incremental decisions, the ones made day after day, which ultimately shapes the order and the place.

There are two issues involved when people talk about dissatisfaction with their physical surroundings: the first is *legibility* or the ability to understand the order of a place and to find your way around in it. ^{p. 15} The second is *aesthetics*, which is the sensory effect of beauty. The old fashioned ideal town, whether it is the elm tree lined Main Street variety or some other model, usually has legibility in spades. This means, among other things, that it can be easily understood, that a mental map of the place can be easily constructed simply by walking or driving around.

In our modern landscape, legibility is often lost. Hierarchy is confused: which spaces and buildings are the most important and how do we know? Our most prominent buildings are shopping malls and office towers, usurping the place that churches and courthouses used to occupy.

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The underlying street order, itself often deliberately obscured by a curved maze design, is not picked up by landscaping or building facades, which seem to be marching to their own individual drummers. The commercial street can be visually indistinct from adjacent parking lots. And unique landmarks have all but disappeared, while every discount store is identical. Lose your way in some cities and you only have signs to save you.

The second issue is *aesthetics*, the gracious and moving environment which has coherence in all its parts, from streets to buildings to windows to landscape to lighting. Ask yourself: What makes a town beautiful? Certainly a beautiful town has the minimum qualification of legibility. Beauty also seems to be tied up in the town's relationship to its site. Beautiful towns are an outgrowth of the natural setting, harmonizing and contrasting with the plains, hills, harbors, forests, lakes, and rivers. The importance of the natural setting can also be found in the consideration for climate and orientation and readily available materials. These often lead to a visual coherence that comes naturally from using traditional building techniques, materials and siting. In our world of air conditioning and international shipping, we have allowed ourselves to ignore these limitations which once gave each community a unique and meaningful image.

A beautiful town has one more critical attribute. It is authentic. It is the community's vision of itself. The prominent buildings are prominent because they represent power in the community, the way courthouses and cathedrals used to do and major office buildings — for better or worse — do today. The public spaces are created and used by the public, not created by out-of-town developers for use by the tourists. What appears to be an old building really is an old building — its continuing existence, its very physical presence is a marker of the collective will of the town, and the town's desire to preserve a memory.

While we can take positive steps as planners to create the circumstances un-

der which beauty can develop, beauty in a town is not achieved by planning or building alone, but by time and events. A beautiful town takes a long while to make, which is one reason we like older places. The planning commission can help this process along by concentrating on legibility: creating order in street layout, in setbacks, in site planning, in attention to the size and prominence of new projects. Beyond this, commissioners should ask — at a minimum — that natural landscape be put to use, rather than ignored. Similarly, planners should avoid the impulse to regularity and sameness, so that their community's individual character — based on its unique history and geography — is allowed to develop.

This is the design role that the planning commission can and should take, making sure that what gets built is authentic, contributes to legibility, and recognizes the natural setting.

Brenda Lightner teaches in the School of Planning at the University of Cincinnati. Prior to moving to Cincinnati, Brenda worked as an urban designer with the City of Boston, and was a Loeb Fellow in Environmental Studies at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Also of note, Brenda is helping put together what promises to be a thought-provoking conference on design review issues, featuring many excellent speakers. It's scheduled for Cincinnati, Ohio, this October 8 - 11. You can contact Brenda for more information: (513) 556-4943, or FAX: (513) 556-3288.



Insights Needed

We are hoping to find planning board members to write for the "Insights" section of the *Planning Commissioners Journal*, or contribute to "News & Notes." If you have something interesting or informative you'd be willing to share with other planning commissioners from across the country, please give us a call (or write). We would be glad to discuss any ideas — or answer any questions — you might have.

Wayne Senville, Editor



Legibility

To urban designers, legibility means more than good penmanship. Kevin Lynch, in the city planning classic *The Image of the City*, defined it this way:

Just as this printed page, if it is legible, can be visually grasped as a related pattern of recognizable symbols, so a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern.

Legibility is created by the use of several important principles. The first is a clearly identifiable *hierarchy of places*. In older small towns, for example, the town square was usually the most important place — and the buildings on it were the most prominent and public ones. It would have been unthinkable to build an ordinary apartment building or a nondescript warehouse on the square.

A second principle is an *underlying order* that is reinforced and repeated in the overall design of the parts. Using a predictable pattern of streets, and reinforcing the pattern by lining up the trees, buildings and sidewalks along the street is a simple idea — but one not often exploited. Instead, plans are often proposed with random street networks, or buildings sited at odd angles.

Kevin Lynch also emphasized the power of *landmarks*, which serve as visual clues to location and hierarchy. In older cities and towns, familiar landmarks typically included the train station, riverfront, memorial fountain, and church. Nowadays we tend to "bury" our landmarks under relatively unimportant signs, buildings, and road networks.