

Culturing community in urban design

By Dean Saitta and Kyle Cascioli

The concept of the “Good City” was first introduced in the 1960s by the philosopher Lawrence Haworth, who believed that a Good City must offer its citizens economic opportunity as well as the means to build strong community. He noted that these two “ingredients” are often in conflict, so they need to be balanced. Today, the Good City is also conceptualized as one that is environmentally sustainable.

In pursuing Good City visions, planners and developers have generally looked to other cities (like Portland) for guidance in creating mixed-use, walkable, and tightly knit communities. Such communities are exemplified locally by Belmar, Lowry and Stapleton. They’ve also looked to foreign architects (like Daniel Libeskind and Santiago Calatrava) for civic building designs (Denver Art Muse-

um, Denver International Airport) that signal Denver’s economic viability and world city ambitions.

But largely ignored in the Good City dialogue are the cultural values that shape how ethnically diverse groups respond to and use the urban-built environment. Given the increasing ethnic diversity of Denver and other American cities, urban sustainability should be broadly viewed in cultural as well as economic and environmental terms. In contrast to the typical “outside in” approach to urban redevelopment, we favor an “inside out” approach that starts with locality — local culture and history, local community needs and aspirations — in planning for vibrant and sustainable urban communities. We thus view real estate development as “contemporary urban anthropology” (CUA).

Building community in a way that is sensitive to social and cultural difference is a central value of New Urban-

ist approaches to urban redevelopment. However, this goal is rarely achieved. New Urbanist developments often don’t provide the variety of affordable housing that would allow even minimal social mixing, much less the kinds of architecture and other built spaces (e.g., parks and plazas) that appeal to the cultural tastes of different potential user populations. The problem is amplified by the fact that land prices rise exponentially the closer a parcel is located to the urban core, where public civic space is most needed. Profitability can impede efforts to build community.

Balancing opportunity and community is central to the inside-out approach of CUA, which has proven its value when applied in other American cities. In Houston, for example, the real estate profession’s traditional “highest and best use” (HBU) approach to development failed to produce a successful anchor tenant for

Westchase Plaza, a retail center in one of the city’s most ethnically diverse trade areas. HBU analysis seeks to find a balance between plans that are legally permissible, physically possible, financially feasible, and maximally productive. Alternatively, the CUA approach added “culturally sustainable” to the formula. It specified that the best anchor tenant for Westchase Plaza would not be a typical retailer or office user but rather a cosmetology school geared toward Hispanics. The school has not only served the local population’s need for job training but also has nicely integrated into the wider community’s diverse ethnic fabric. (For more, visit www.ContemporaryUrbanAnthropology.com.)

Effective, culturally sensitive urban planning will depend on changes in the way we educate real estate professionals. Higher education should be the catalyst for imagining new

ways of thinking about real estate redevelopment, as well as the infill architecture and other built space that might better allow the users of redeveloped real estate to create distinctive identities for themselves.

Students must learn to view urban design and development as both an economic challenge and a cultural opportunity. They must learn that where designed space can be culturally transformed by its users into lived place, the prospects for sustainability are improved. Better collaboration across established academic disciplines promises to deliver ideas and plans that better serve the cause of building viable, sustainable and good cities.

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