

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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## City Design Centers

American Planning  
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### Introduction

Cities have typically organized their urban design activities within their planning departments, but in recent years there seems to have been a growing desire for establishing urban design centers that have their own identity.

There are any number of reasons why urban design is once again receiving public attention. One is that the development boom of the 80s and 90s generated increasing public concern about the pace of change in cities and the quality of development, concern that often manifested itself in opposition to projects. So there has been a growing pressure on the public sector to be concerned about the quality of what is being built.

Another reason is that there is a growing interest in urban quality of life in general, and an increasingly sophisticated understanding about the role urban design plays in that issue.

But why create a new organization, an urban design center? For one thing, the opportunity is there. Many large cities eliminated their urban design functions because of downsizing, and small and medium cities never had an urban design function in any form.

For another, there is a desire for urban designers to be more entrepreneurial. That means creating organizations that have one foot in and one foot out of city government, which can operate in a way that is perceived as not really being part of city government (even if they really are).

There are three basic models for design centers, and each of the following presentations represents one of them. One model is the design center that is totally housed within city government, such as my office, CityDesign, in Seattle. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the independent non-

profit that is focused on urban design issues. Ray Gastil represents one of those, The Van Alen Institute in New York City. The third model is a hybrid, funded by some combination of city government, universities or other sources. The Chattanooga Planning and Design Studio is one, and Karen Hundt will speak about it.

In spite of the generic title “urban design center,” our organizations have fairly different missions, but there are similarities that often include work program items such as design review of development projects as well as education and outreach. And, inevitably, our work involves a collaboration between a number of public sector and private sector entities. Urban design by its very nature is collaborative, intergovernmental and inter-jurisdictional. What ties us all together, and what gives us our commonality, is that what we are all about is making the public sector a better client. That, perhaps, is the most important role that an urban design center, and an urban designer, can play.

—John Rahaim



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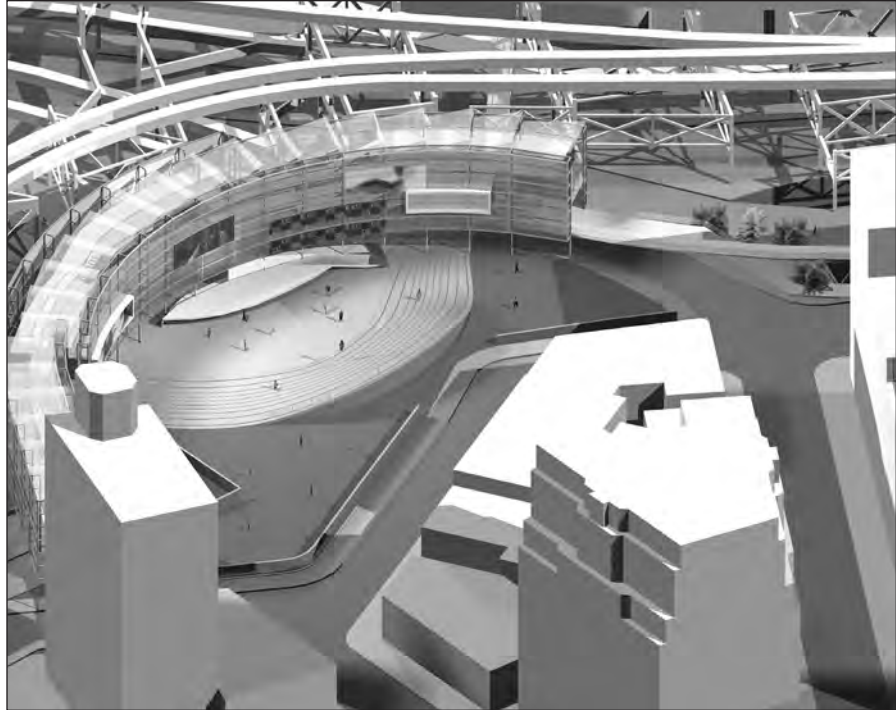
## Van Alen Institute: Projects in Public Architecture, New York

The Van Alen Institute: Projects in Public Architecture is a private not for profit in New York City. We sponsor exhibitions, competitions, public forums and publications that try to raise the bar about what design can be for a city. We don't consider New York, even, to be a hothouse of excellence in the built environment, and that's something we want to change.

We were endowed by William Van Alen, architect of the Chrysler Building. One thing that our name asserts, and which those of you in urban design know, is that private projects often have enormous public impact. The Chrysler Building is good example; it shaped the public's impression of de-sign in New York, yet it was entirely an effort of private enterprise.

We collaborate with communities, civic groups, city agencies, schools and others. One of our most important roles is making the public sector a better client for design, or what I call "investing in the client realm." We:

- Help public agencies recognize the consequences of their actions, in physical and environmental terms.
- Help agencies and community groups realize that urban design means more than putting flower baskets on street lamps.
- Help private interests realize that there will be a political and financial return on urban design investments.
- Help the architectural community look at urban design not as a bunch of guidelines that get in the way of doing creative work but as an opportunity for doing better work.
- Help the urban design and planning community realize that big plans and bold designs by architects are not simply egomaniacal wrongs, but sometimes may be right for the city.
- Help the public and its leadership



recognize that public architecture that incorporates urban design is at its base is about ideas as much as anything else, and that ideas are not a bad thing.

- Help academics who study space and place realize that without a physical environment, none of their ideas about public life count for much.

We try to focus on places that have consequences for more than just the immediate neighborhood. In Queens, the borough president asked us to organize a design competition for Queens Plaza, where a major bridge, elevated and underground subway lines, and some arterial streets all converge in a large public space. There was new zoning to turn the area into an office district, and upcoming air quality and transportation study, and increased interest from arts groups and design-related businesses. Without visualization and the involvement of the larger public, she thought, we would never get interesting ideas about how the district could change.

After 9/11, we joined with twenty-

one other design and planning organizations in an effort called New York New Visions—a scale of collaboration that has never occurred in New York before. One of my colleagues noted that New York is like Santamino, the city with so many different towers, a metaphor for the idea that there should be different organizations doing the same thing. NYNV has been worthwhile, but there is also a reason to have competing efforts. Providing an outlet for competing voices is one way that a design center can help a city achieve quality design.

—Raymond Gastil  
*Raymond Gastil is executive director of the Van Alen Institute.*

Proposal for a "media wall" at Queens Plaza in New York City, winner of a recent design competition. Graphics by Surachai Akekapobyotin and Juthathip Techachumreon. Courtesy Van Alen Institute: Projects in Public Architecture.

## CityDesign, Seattle

CityDesign was established in 1999 in Seattle's Department of Design Construction and Land Use and Construction. It grew out of the desire of the Seattle Design Commission, an appointed body that reviews all of the city's public works, for the city to get out in front of private development, rather than just react to it. Mayor Paul Schell, who formerly was dean of the University of Washington architecture school, was strongly supportive at the time.

There are three parts to our work program, some of which we inherited, such as design review and project review, and some of which we invented as we went along. Those latter functions include strategic urban design work and education and outreach, which is probably the most difficult for a public sector office to do.

As part of our design review work, we staff the Design Commission, which reviews the city's capital public projects, from the new city hall designed by Peter Bohlin to the controversial but interesting new central library designed by Rem Koolhaas. The commission's work is interesting because, inevitably, these projects can't be talked about in isolation, so the commission has become more and more involved in discussions about the larger urban design issues that surround these projects.

We also staff a panel that reviews the design of the city's light rail system, which will start construction this summer—the transit agency actually funds one of our staff positions. And we advise a separate design review program that considers all private residential and commercial development in the city above certain thresholds.

Secondly, we take on strategic urban design work. Our focus has



largely been in the center city because that's where most of Seattle's growth is taking place. We are currently looking at how to create open spaces for and connections among the various parts of downtown.

Allan Jacobs says that if you add up all the acreage of the parks, plazas and other conventional open spaces in your city, it wouldn't come close to the amount of space devoted to streets. By our measurements, thirty percent of the land in downtown Seattle is in the public right-of-way. So it makes great sense for us to look at streets and to think about them as open space. We took on a program called "green streets," which was already on the books and allows certain streets that have low traffic volumes to become alternative kinds of open space. Developers are able to achieve bonuses if they contribute to building part of a green street.

Even though we are a small office, for us to be effective, we need to take on a full range of activities, from

large-scale urban design plans to coming as close as possible to implementation. That is not only our best hope for political survival, but it also helps us to learn from each end of the spectrum; the street design work greatly informs our larger urban design work and vice versa.

—*John Rabaim*  
*John Rabaim is Executive Director of the Seattle Design Commission and CityDesign, and the former Associate Director of the Department of City Planning in Pittsburgh.*

Proposal for a "green street," part of a program of alternative street designs. Courtesy CityDesign.



## Chattanooga Planning and Design Studio

Chattanooga's Planning and Design Studio is officially an office of the joint Chattanooga–Hamilton County Regional Planning Agency, which provides us with funding and staff. But we really are a combination public–private organization. We also receive funding and staffing from The River City Company, a not-for-profit development corporation. The Lyndhurst Foundation, which has been instrumental in Chattanooga's turnaround, was one of the original partners in the studio and continues to provide funding. And the University of Tennessee School of Architecture, which is located in Knoxville, also provides funding and staffing for our office.

To be quite honest, we use this situation to our advantage: On some days we talk about how we are part of local government, and on other days we are able to stress our autonomy.

We basically concentrate on three kinds of work. We spend our time helping the community develop a collective vision, on doing good solid planning and on implementation.

The word “collective” is key. You cannot do any kind of major project in Chattanooga anymore without significant public participation. We've done such a good job of involving the community that they now expect it, in fact, they demand it. For example, we had a kickoff recently for a new downtown planning process. We had an event at 7:45 a.m., and more than three hundred people showed up, just to talk about downtown planning. That's the kind of response we get.

Next is good solid planning. One of the differences between the design

Ross's Landing, on the Chattanooga River, before and after redevelopment. Courtesy Chattanooga Planning and Design Studio.



studio and a conventional planning agency is that we spend a lot of time looking at the third dimension. Planning agencies often look at two dimensional maps, zoning maps, policies, subdivision regulations, those sorts of things. We try to look at how things are really going to look in the built environment.

Implementation is a large part of what we do. For example, we were concerned about a wonderful old building downtown that was vacant. We made some renderings showing what it could look like; then, working with River City Company, we found someone to take this project on. Our local United Way chapter needed to expand, so we convinced them to purchase this building, renovate it and move in. A lot of our time is spent in collaboration and coordination for these types of projects.

Another arena we work in is the public realm—public spaces, such as parks, plazas or streets. We spend a lot

of time on street projects, whether it's looking at the design of new pedestrian lights, picking tree species with the urban forester, making sure a new restaurant's cafe doesn't take over the sidewalk, or persuading the state transportation office to let us try two-way streets again downtown. These details are really very critical from an urban design standpoint.

Great projects require great planning, and I would add that they require great design. We can't have architects on one side, planners on another and engineers and public works in another corner. We have to work together, and I think that our design studio's role is to be a convener, to bring those people together.

—Karen Hundt

*Karen Hundt is director of the Chattanooga Planning and Design Studio.*