

UC Berkeley

Places

Title

The City is more than Contingent [The Mayors Institute on City Design]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2ck324mw>

Journal

Places, 5(4)

ISSN

0731-0455

Author

Campbell, Robert

Publication Date

1989-04-01

Peer reviewed

The City Is More than Contingent

Robert Campbell

If there is an essence to the Mayors Institute, I think, it is simply a belief in the primacy of the physical world. The Institute is an attempt to introduce a set of physical priorities into the thinking of a group of people—American mayors—who are conditioned to think of the world almost exclusively in terms of abstract, nonphysical value systems, especially those of economics, politics, and social welfare. It says nothing against the importance to our lives of those three disciplines to maintain that the physical world also exists with its own independent set of values. One can argue about what those values are or should be. The important thing is to recognize that they exist. The physical built world is more than the outcome and expression—the visible graph—of underlying abstract forces. It is more than contingent.

There is, of course, a reciprocal to this idea. If mayors, pressed by human and economic needs, can become blind to the physical environment, then designers are at least equally apt to get so fascinated by visual and sculptural games that they become blind to social realities. The larger purpose of the Institute is thus to bring together two subcultures—that of design and that of political leadership—in the hope that both can learn.

The mayors, from a designer's point of view, have proved to be extremely quick learners and extremely articulate people, although one can't tell how deep the learning goes or how long it is retained.

(The following comments are excerpted from remarks made by Jaquelin Robertson, Dean of the School of Architecture, University of Virginia, at Mayors Institutes convened in October 1986 and April 1987.)

Every mayor and every business and every planner and agency should ask one another every week, what kind of town do we want? What kind are we likely to be able to have, given our location, conditions, and so forth? What are the physical characteristics of these wish lists that we make up? Because if you say that you want sunshine in the streets and lots of trees and you don't have those, there's a mismatch.

A first generic problem is size and limit, and many of us have talked about it. I think avoiding that issue is impossible. Definition and legibility—does the city have an edge? Are its entry points identified? Is there a center? When you say I have arrived in Norwalk, where have you arrived? What is the place that says this is Norwalk?

Feeling in the center or at the edge has a lot to do with density. How are the FAR [floor-area ratio] standards of your central business district arrived at? Are they based on population growth projections, special use, absorption rates, available empty land at the core of the city, paid-for infrastructure? Almost none are. But how would you arrive at them if they weren't based on that? What are acceptable and attractive residential zoning

densities? Allan Jacobs and I have talked about this—15 to 30 dwelling units per acre? You know that you can do quite good things with 15 to 30, it's quite dense.

As important perhaps as anything that we talked about is the balance between the natural and the built worlds. I don't think in the United States you can have good cities without that balance between trees and parks and buildings.

And something we didn't talk about: public monuments and the ways in which cities commemorate and rewrite their own history over time. These are physically necessary for every culture.

The design of public spaces is the central design concern of architects. In the end, architects were intended to design cities. Buildings come very easily if you know what the design of the city is. It becomes impossible if you have no idea, because then it's just willful shape-making.

In short, the most desirable communities in the next 30 years are going to be those that know what they want and can put that down in easily understood laws that are extremely rigorous with respect to amenity and development and growth control, because the rest of the world around is going to be a wasteland of people savaging one another.

Often they have been just as aware of issues in urban design as any of the designers. What they are also keenly aware of is the great force of circumstance, the great inertial mass of legislation, vested interest, and cultural habit. Often they seem to feel themselves to be powerless or, at best, to be brokers among the forces of circumstance.

A common phenomenon has been for the mayors to hear, from the designers, an expression of the same common-sense values (often "old-fashioned") in which they themselves believe, but which they have been hesitant to assert against the perverse advice of shallow expert specialists. The Institute thus has the effect of giving the mayors permission to trust their own instincts and experience in the field of urban design. Most of the designers invited to the Institute sessions have been generalists; there is therefore a tacit assertion that design decisions are best made by generalists, integrating and evaluating the advice of experts, rather than by experts themselves. Mayors are, by the nature of their jobs, generalists. The hope is that they will leave the sessions not only better educated but also feeling empowered to assert their own intuitions.

It is difficult to judge what the impact of the Mayors Institute has been or will be. Because the designers have tended to support the positive qualities of more traditional forms of urbanism, the sessions have undoubtedly improved the morale of mayors of older cities,

who perhaps regarded their existing fabric as outdated. If this is true, then the Institute may also have strengthened the sense of self and of local culture. More important, the Institute has perhaps suggested that design is another kind of language in which to talk about cities, a language different from the language of budgets or service-provision. Design can be an alternative way of thinking about the city, a fresh way of framing a particular urban problem. It can be a tool for a creative mayor, a way of catalyzing people, a way of relating the present to the future, a way of creating a self-image for the community.

For the designers, the Institute experience teaches that design is not a game we invent and play among ourselves but something much more important, something that deals with very real, very important, and very difficult issues. Questions of architectural style or individual reputation vaporize quickly in the heat of the real-world problems and conflicts that are presented by the mayors to the sessions. Professionals are encouraged to address what really matters and to think and talk about design clearly enough to be understood. Surely they take this lesson away with them. They learn, too, from one another and sometimes feel ratified in their own views in the same way that the mayors do. They meet one another and form useful friendships. In listening to the mayors, they learn something about how decisions are made in cities; and in reviewing the problems the mayors present, they perceive



recurrences from one city to another, recurrences that suggest patterns and generalizations about our cities.

As far as specific impacts, it is too early to judge the Institute. Some of the mayors have requested that designers make follow-up visits to their cities, either to advise on particular problems or to present, perhaps to the planning staff or aldermen, the same message heard earlier by the mayor at the Institute. One mayor issued an RFP [request for proposal] for an urban-design study based in part on the advice he received at the Institute. Others have asked for recommendations of consultants.

It is unlikely, it seems to me, that this kind of specific intervention will ever amount to a great deal. There are too many cities and problems and too few Institute-affiliated designers. The Mayors Institute should be thought of, instead, as a long-term educational exercise. Some of the mayors will undoubtedly go on to higher office; others will remain influential in their cities for decades to come. Many of the designers will perform important work.

It is said that one can learn only what one already knows but has not yet articulated. Part of the experience of the Mayors Institute has been the discovery of how much the mayors and the designers know in common, but have as yet failed to articulate to each other or to themselves.