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## Places

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### Author

Kriken, John L

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Paolo Polledri's article "Dreamscape, Reality and Afterthought" (*Places* 7:2, Winter 1991) reminded me how much I disagree with the popular view that San Francisco has no civic design vision. On the contrary, no American city has arrived at a stronger vision of what it wants to be. No American city has more engaged its citizens in defining this vision, and, despite some well known failures and breakdowns, no American city has worked so consistently towards its realization.

Polledri writes that "we need a vision to point us in the right direction and to overcome the uncertainty and unease that pervades contemporary urban life." As a negative example, he describes San Francisco's becoming a "tourist ghetto with hotels and shopping malls on the water."

I would argue that most San Franciscans have strong feelings about what the city should look like. Often these derive from its unique natural setting — white buildings seen across water, against green hills. Thus, the vision does not come so much from individual buildings, as it does in Chicago, as it does from an overall sense of place.

San Francisco has a strong identity. Its districts are able to maintain and improve themselves through a design policy that requires new buildings to be compatible with existing ones in terms of height, bulk, color and ground-level treatment. Thus the district takes priority over individual buildings — a circumstance that may annoy some architects and their historians.

At the same time there is a strong desire for visual complexity and diversity, for which citizens have fought successfully at the ballot box. For example, voters have used the initiative process to stop hotels, baseball stadiums and even the construction of a home port for the battleship *Missouri*. The goal has been to preserve public access to the city's waterfront and prevent tourist domination, a characteristic of life in San Francisco that is considered essential by a majority of its inhabitants. This is not "factionalism," as Polledri maintains, but the expression of a remarkable consensus.

Finally, San Franciscans are committed to a pedestrian life supported by public transit and an urban fabric that encourages walking. With this comes not only a bias against cars, but also a

concern for pedestrian comfort and enjoyment. Public design policy requires access to sunlight, views and open space and protection from the wind. Put these and other ideas together and you have a powerful design vision for the city — a vision that grows out of the value people place on maintaining the city's well known diversity and livability.

Polledri asserts that "the understanding of urban and architectural issues is limited to a small, specialized and professionally trained segment of the public.... In consequence, much of the physical environment is unknown and incomprehensible to the majority of [San Francisco's] inhabitants.

I disagree. In 1970, Allan Jacobs, then San Francisco's planning director, published the city's first urban design plan. Clear and accessible, the plan communicated to ordinary citizens what was right and wrong with the city's development and preservation patterns, inviting them to take an active role in determining its future. They have done so, and today — in response to continuous public pressure — San Francisco has stronger and more consistent urban design policies than any other American metropolis.

Since this is a political and democratic process, some factionalism is inevitable, but there is also an overriding impulse — an ecological impulse, for lack of a better term — to preserve the city and region from further degradation and restore it as a setting for life of every kind. In this respect, Olmsted may be a more valuable antecedent than Burnham in suggesting to designers the nature of their response and the breadth of their involvement in guiding this vision and giving it form, content and expression. I do not think it will lack for beauty and excitement.

— John L. Kriken

*John L. Kriken, FALA, is a partner of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and an Arts Commissioner of the City of San Francisco. He is the architect in charge of the Mission Bay project, which was discussed in Polledri's article.*

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