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Caring for Places: Imagining Difference

As the pressures of change and growth transform the very conditions of our being, the public realm urgently needs attention. We need to learn to make each project advance the place of which it is a part. There are many to advocate for singular advantage, but often no real voice or measure of extended consequence. The public realm needs publicity.

Articles in the theme section of this issue, guest-edited by Charles C. Bohl with Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, explore both the differentiation of places according to their location in the region, and the dynamic between thinking in larger patterns and nurturing/accommodating the specific and the innovative as they contribute to the public realm. The works described here intend to overcome a ubiquitous form of thinking that has placed automobile access and singular buildings at the apex of a system of codes and regulations that now govern the dispersal of America and the excessive consumption of both land and energy resources.

To offset the bundle of uniform, auto-oriented assumptions that have infiltrated planning and development processes nationwide, and that now guide construction of large segments of the U.S. (and increasingly the rest of the world), they suggest a graduated scale of development types, each suited to its position in a section (transect) cut through the land to reflect a complete range of possible settlement densities, from rural to urban. Each area of the transect is coded to certain types of building form, landscape arrangements, street designs, and transportation modes. The transect approach establishes arrangements that can, and should, be tuned to specific cultural and geographic conditions.

For some, the idea of new form-based design codes based on transect zones may simply be about substituting one set of universalizing assumptions for another. Following a transect-derived form-based code may reduce the mindless disorder of the suburban strip and lead to more clearly defined places at a variety of densities. But some “disorder” may also reflect the vibration of lives lived differently as a result of changing cultural and economic patterns. Aberrations may also result from a spirited urge to manifest an individual view on what it means to care for one’s place in the world—to provide an intelligent dissent that is uncomfortable, but instructive.

Whatever the case, the idea of the transect raises important issues that planners, designers, and interested citizens should be addressing. As we have often pointed out, the purpose of *Places* is not to answer questions, but to raise them. How can any system of codes and regulations really help “build community”? If not the transect, how can we frame ideas about the connections of building form to location, and then bring them to play in community decisions? We need intelligent new theories about how to improve the often dismal quality of the world expanding around us.

Building community requires absorbing the energies of life. We must learn to construct places that have sufficient diversity to nurture both change and reassurance. Used as a ground for imagining broad differences, the transect can help us to get there—emphasizing fundamental relationships in the public realm and giving them force. Used as a confining doctrine rather than as a tool for building communities of interests, it will not. We need places that encourage and sustain both individual aspiration and common understanding.

—Donlyn Lyndon