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The Role of Urban Design in Developing Communities

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ABSTRACT

The research that underpins this paper is based in European city centres. As the 20th Century unfolded, many of these cities began to lose their identities. The international style of architecture and emphasis on urban roads, created a situation in which morphological, cultural and stylistic variations were bulldozed out of history – generating buildings and spaces that could be almost anywhere. This research finds its origins in city structuring and how the careful expression of focal buildings that represent society, contextual buildings that represent more commonplace uses, squares for the assembly of citizens and streets for access – together create city centres that are not only legible but also support the psyche of communities. The proposition is that as people move between the symbols of society on a daily basis, they are psychologically reassured about the strength and stability of the particular city. Such places are attractive to visitors and citizens alike – reinforcing the political, spiritual, legal, social, economic and environmental frameworks that constitute success in the present and optimism for the future.

KEYWORDS: Urban Design, Community, City Centres, Europe

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, cities and society developed and flourished in an almost symbiotic manner. The Latin word for city is *civitas*, from which the words *civilisation* and *citizenship* are derived. Despite being home to a minority of the population prior to the industrial revolution, cities dominated their surroundings and exerted immense influence in all spheres of human endeavour. Although there was a tense division of wealth and power between the countryside landowners and the city based merchants, over time the latter prevailed. As well as being seats of power, wealth and

knowledge, cities have also been catalysts for social change and revolution. They have been the source of most of the lasting developments that underpin human freedoms. Arguably cities are the birthplace of democracy.

The essence of cities is that they contain a myriad of diverse and intense connections and activities, where people live, work, shop and play, meeting needs of economic production and social reproduction (Smith, 2002). They bring together people from many different backgrounds and cultures. This can be purely in terms of physical proximity but can also create the space for a ferment of ideas, styles and activities. They are centres for many cultural forms. Without romanticising their history, which has its grim share of oppression, hunger, crime and pollution - cities have been the driving force for innovation, social improvement, cultural activity and diversity.

As well as density of population and networks of activities, cities have public buildings and spaces for government, organised religion, education, commerce, social interaction, cultural events and public services. These buildings and spaces play an important role in providing a focus for communities. They offer emotional attraction for both citizens and visitors, embodying political and cultural significance, and landmarks in time and space. They link the past, present and future, become reassuringly familiar to local people and stimulating for visitors. Lozano (1990) argues that the city is a realm with a high level of culture linked with the most civilised expression of social behaviour. Mumford (1966) describes the city as the most advanced work of art of human civilisation.

Traditional cities have had complex spatial layouts reflecting the multiplicity of human exchanges. They have been alive with the richness of patterns and symbols that fulfil many psychological and spiritual needs. For example, the sense of enclosure and spatial definition provided by medieval walls satisfied more than just a need for defensive protection. They also provided psychological stimulation and physical comfort (Lozano 1990). The need to pattern human surroundings is as valid today as it was in medieval times, and this is particularly recognised by Alexander (1987 and Alexander *et al.* 1977) and Lynch (1960 and 1984). Their ideas about legibility are based on a vivid and integrated physical setting that can provide the raw material for a symbolic and collective community memory. The layout, landmarks and public spaces all contribute to each city's distinctive sense of identity.
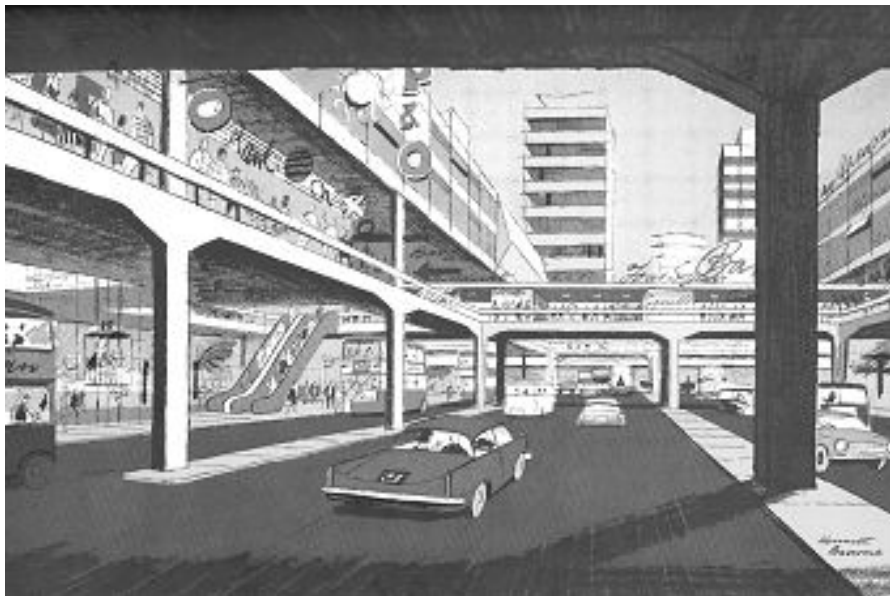
Urban space has always been the place for the community rather than the individual, where activities are representative of the distinctiveness of that settlement. It was where the framework of society was debated and formulated, and where economic activity took place. Krier (1979) believes that modern cities have lost sight of the traditionally understood importance of urban space. Of all the types of urban space, the square is most associated with the values of the society that created it – the agora, forum,

cloister, Muslim courtyard, are all examples.   Public spaces are not necessarily benign; many have been used for martial rituals or public execution, yet they also have a democratic tradition that allows access for the community.

2. FROM CENTRES TO SENSELESS

The last two centuries have seen a dramatic transformation in cities from being largely of walking distances and embedded within a neighbouring countryside to widespread urban sprawl. As a consequence the urban areas of today while still having a dense concentration of population, have lost much of the essence and character of the city.

The combined actions of economic power and planning have undermined the importance of distinct spaces and landmarks that established the character and spaces of cities. Many urban patterns and traditional connections have been weakened or lost, slashed by mega redesigns that ignored centuries of evolution. Cities have been scarred by major road networks, which occupy large areas of land, fragment and blight neighbourhoods destroying local social interchange (Appelyard, 1981) and disconnect travellers from their surroundings. Sprawl, traffic, zoning and major redevelopments have destroyed the fabric of buildings and spaces, often replacing diversity with large single-use structures that have a hostile and imposing presence.

Figure 374.1 Model for mid 20th Century City Centre Development

In the process of modernisation, urban communities have lost the richness of patterns and symbols that made each city distinct. One of the experiences of the 20th century has been that planning tended to drill all places into a similar type while development based on market forces has created a meaningless jumble of buildings, lacking all sensory stimulation, sense of place or even idea of location. Lozano's (1990) concept of cities as being the setting of culture and civilised behaviour became increasingly fragile.
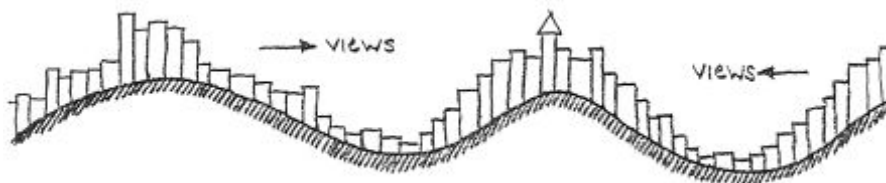
In modern cities, central places are rare, leaving only a spatial vacuum between buildings. This approach tends to be symptomatic of the bureaucratic non-city where urban spaces are created by default if they have not already been replaced by roads. In contrast, good urban design recognises that there is an advantage in emphasising some elements and subordinating others. The effect of the symbols of society is lost if they are scattered aimlessly around the city. An impression of unimportance is suggested if they are found in ordinary streets or next to the by-pass. Many of the buildings that now dominate cities such as office or residential blocks, retail and leisure complexes would formerly have been contextual developments. In the 20th century modern city, they appear as landmark buildings such that the order of built form has been turned upside down. Many public buildings have been rendered insignificant, losing much traditional symbolism in the process. Landmarks are no longer socially, politically or even economically significant and rarely visually, culturally and spiritually uplifting.

Today's modern landmarks reflect the values of commercialism, where offices and retail units have replaced the library and the town hall. This reversal damages the fabric of the city as such buildings do not connect with the social or physical fabric, nor reflect the identity of a particular city and its community. Bookchin (1995) has argued that when there is a physical loss of cityness in favour of huge bland conurbations, there is a parallel loss of citizenship. Active citizenship is discouraged and replaced by the role of consumer or, at best, passive voter. Power is concentrated in large companies and government tends to act in their favour. Recent trends in global economics and telecommunications have produced the claim that place no longer matters.

3. RENAISSANCE

The last few years have seen a re-emphasis on the importance of cities with encouragement of city living, calls for an improvement in the quality of urban design, and support for public space (CABE, 2002, 2004 and 2006; DETR, 2000 a and b; Urban Task Force, 1999). In this way, urban design can be connected to the social and environmental networks in which buildings and spaces exist.

Designing buildings in scale with the traditional pattern of a city could be a first step towards regaining an urban community (Lozano 1990). This is not to denigrate the desirability of a proper system of planning. Indeed, the advantages of a sympathetic plan, prepared with forethought and care to provide for the needs of the community are self-evident. Yet, despite a long history of planning on behalf of the community, one of the problems of the early 21st Century is that there has been a great decline in the public realm. We may be richer as individuals but as citizens we are getting poorer. There has been a retreat into the private realm - with emphasis on personal comfort, consumption and security (Tibbalds 1990). A response could be that development in different areas of a city needs to be guided by a planned framework. Development cannot be based on unconscious and accidental character but must reflect the rules of conscious and ordered design. However, each framework needs to be specific to a locality. Topography and other natural features that are unique to a particular place should be integrated and emphasised.
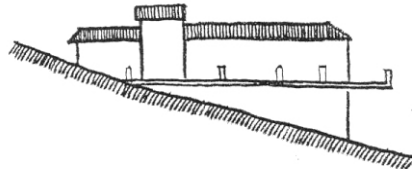

Figure 374.2 Topography and Building Heights

For instance, keeping buildings at valley bottoms to the same or smaller scale to those at the tops of hills actually emphasises the topography. Other contrasts in response to topography are clearly evident in the following illustrations:

TRADITIONAL BUILDINGS   MODERN PLANNING

| Buildings related to topography – small units capable of stepping down a hill creates a varied and interesting streetscape | Large boxes, incapable of dealing with the topography except by introducing artificial levels and ramps resulting in a monotonous streetscape |

Figure 374.3 Built Responses to Topography

Sitte's (1889) argument was that if traditional methods were taken into account in modern planning, the result would be a city plan that encourages parks, gardens squares and streets, all defined by groups of buildings. In this analysis, there are two distinct building typologies. The first is associated with professional design and the second with the generation of human habitats (Giddings 1999). Buildings of professional design should be recognised by styles of high culture and should be reserved for buildings that have symbolic functions in a particular community. For example:

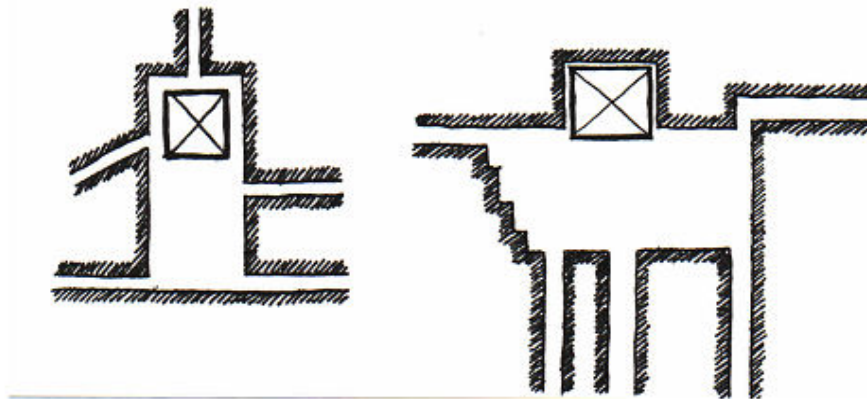|	
Government	castles, palaces, parliaments, city halls
Religion	temples, cathedrals, churches, mosques
Public Facilities	museums, theatres, exhibition halls
Law	courtrooms
Health	hospitals
Education	universities

A few exclusive residences may also be included but these are usually part of the political, social and economic power structure of the community.

Design solutions in this genre should originate in the rules of style, be impressive, prominent and aimed at achieving masterpieces. In this context, innovation is an essential ingredient. Moreover, as the buildings are representative of the wealth and power base of a civilisation and at least in theory, designed as a whole, the wealth associated with them should reduce delays and make them available to the community as they are needed.

The second type is more to do with context, unity, harmony, etc. Often the buildings appear in what is known as the vernacular. They are essentially private and offer more commonplace uses, such as: residence, employment, leisure and shopping. This appears to be the basis for a sound framework but there are difficulties with it. Invariably, so much has been overlaid upon a city that any local tradition occupies at best a minority of space and is therefore of dubious relevance. Secondly, an international style of building may have subsumed any traditional methods. This raises questions as to whether other styles might also be legitimately included.
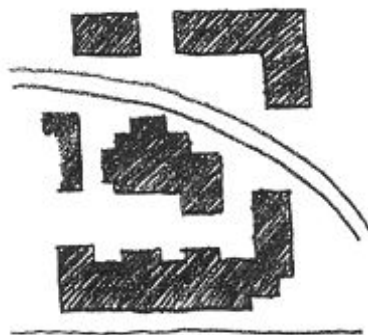
Thirdly, there may be a problem where new uses demand a scale and/or type of space not generated by a local building tradition. Shopping is one use that has tended to outgrow its traditional accommodation – with the advent of supermarkets, superstores, department stores, retail

warehouses, etc. Yet, regardless of these difficulties, a policy that expresses the difference between focal and contextual buildings will greatly assist in restoring fascinating and functional urban environments. In many successful situations, each focal building is related to a place of assembly, outside its main entrance. This introduces an important concept that the entrance to each focal building should lead onto a public square. Also, the position of the focal building tends to determine the direction of the square. Some pioneers go further to suggest that in deep plan squares, the focal building should have vertical emphasis, eg a church, whereas in wide plan squares, it should have horizontal emphasis, eg city hall.

Figure 374.4 Deep and Wide Plan Squares

Contextual buildings perform two roles. First, they provide the frame for the focal buildings. Secondly, they define and contain urban space. It is the contextual buildings that should form the squares and define the streets.

No relationship between street and
buildings creates amorphous and
ambiguous urban space

Street defined by buildings
becomes clear urban space

Figure 374.5 Relationships between Street and Buildings

Thus, there is a need for visual continuity, even if the buildings are not physically attached in a continuous manner. The nature of these rows of contextual buildings can be expressed as Architectural Frameworks, two examples of which are illustrated below:
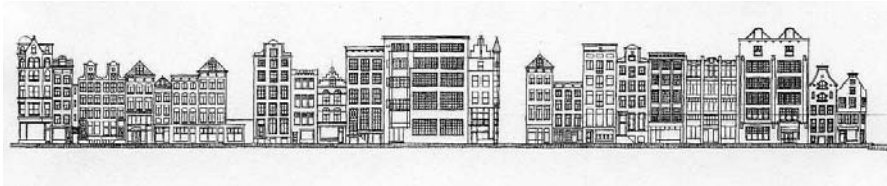
assertive architectural framework
- informal
- greater variety of styles
- greater range of materials
- more elaborate facades
- emphatic changes in building line
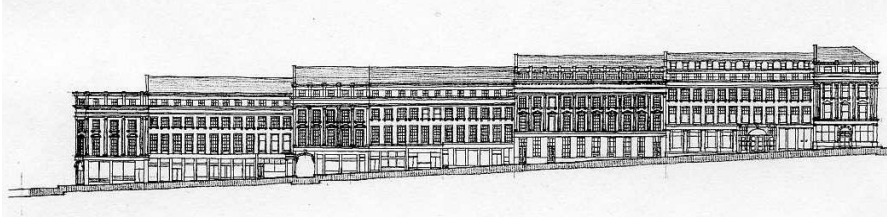- raised skyline
- narrower frontages

passive architectural framework
- formal
- limited number of styles
- limited range of materials
- simple elevations
- minimal changes in building line
- little skyline interest
- broader frontages

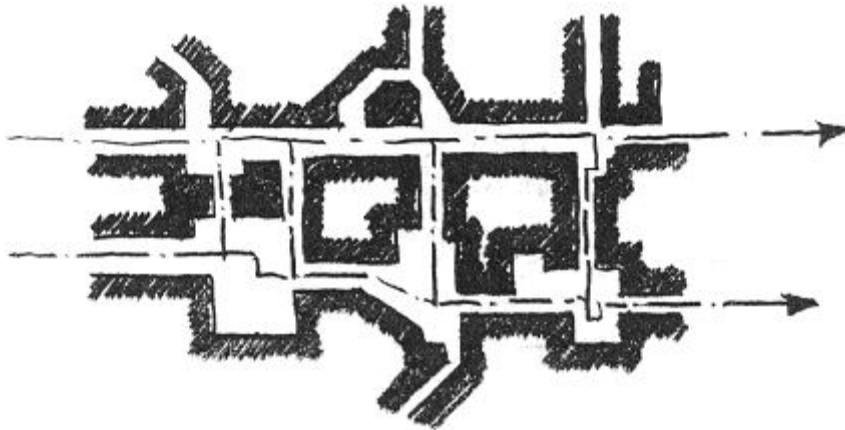Assertive Architectural Framework *example :Amsterdam, Holland*

Passive Architectural Framework *example: Newcastle, England*

Figure 374.6 Architectural Frameworks

4. INTERACTION WITH CITY CENTRE SPACES

It has already been established that the entrance to every focal building should lead onto a public square. If each of these buildings also displays a distinct attribute of the society it represents, then each square marks the arrival at that symbol of society. Individually, every pairing of symbolic building and square can have quite a dramatic effect on the psyche of the citizens. Traditionally, clusters of urban spaces have been such frequent phenomena that they were considered the rule and single public squares as the exception. An objective therefore, could be to create groups of interconnected places rather than isolated statements. It is fun to meander from space to space and place to place but people need different kinds of movement and a multiplicity of routes from the very direct to a variety of options. The special effect that results from walking about from one square to another in a cleverly grouped sequence is that our reference points change constantly, creating ever-new impressions.

Figure 374.7 Different Kinds of Movement through Spaces

Human life, activity and culture depend on the environment (Davidson, 2000; Giddings *et al.* 2002). The layout of a city can encourage social interaction or act as a form of social control. In the latter case, if spaces for assemblies, rallies, events, entertainment etc., either do not exist or are so ill-conceived that they are not welcoming, then the inhabitants will live their lives independently or at best in small groups. Certain political organisations delight in this form of social control but it does not suit mature European societies. In Stuttgart for example, social interaction in public spaces is greatly encouraged. It is suggested here that the kind of ethos, which enables useful public space to thrive, strengthens the identity of place and the deep psychological connections of the community with the place. This approach becomes all the more significant when the buildings are also considered. This city centre contains some powerful symbols of society. The Rathaus (Town Hall), symbol of local government and political order, stands with its main entrance opening onto Markt-Platz – the physical and metaphorical focus of the city. The Altes-Schloss (Old Castle) is a symbol of history, longevity and past conflicts resulting from a less developed society. The Justiz Ministry symbolises law and order, and the Stiftskirch represents spiritual fulfilment. These three buildings define Schiller-Platz, only second in importance to Markt-Platz in the spatial hierarchy. The buildings around this square are the only ones in

the centre to pre-date the 20th Century (Sterra, 1991), a reminder that they do not represent temporary or transient values. The square itself pays homage to the great German poet, indicating the significance of the Arts. Along Dorotheenstrasse is the Markthalle, symbol of trade and sustenance. The proximity of the church and market illustrates the two sides of human need ie spiritual and physical. The proposition is that the community is

psychologically re-assured by the clarity of these symbols as they move through the public spaces. There is a permanence of civilisation that is associated with the layout.
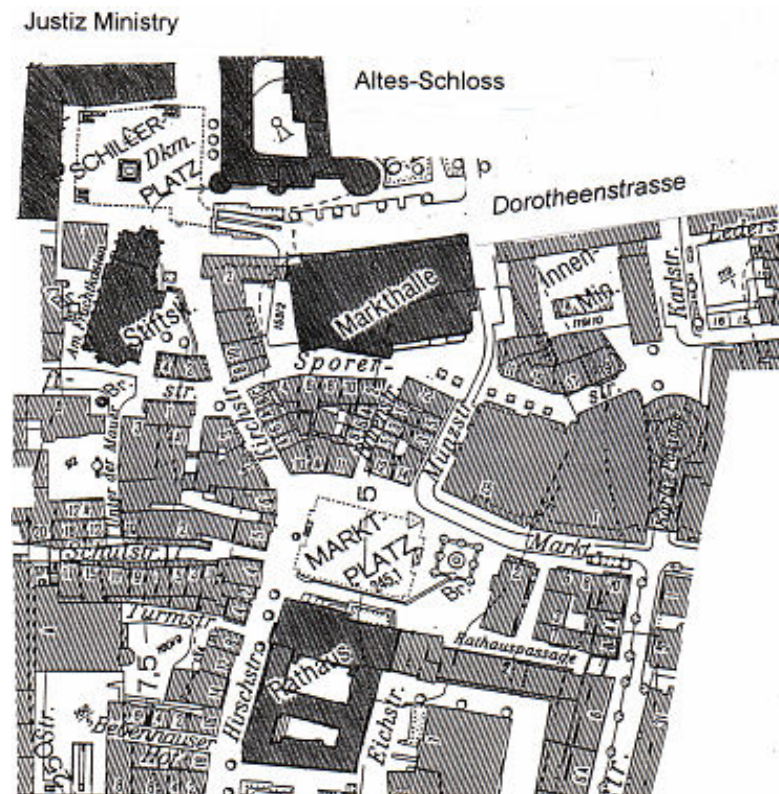
Figure 374.8: Stuttgart City Centre

5. CONCLUSION

Often the best way to strengthen the centre of cities is to support the existing local people, business and activities local culture and festivals. These enhance the quality of the environment, encourage walking, support public places and buildings, and design for people. While this may not appeal to the property developer or the politician keen on the big change; it may take time but is organic, connected to the city and more likely to last. This all contributes to distinctive places, rich in diversity and activity (Jacobs, 1961; Gratz, 1998).

The essence of cities is close connections and dense activity. Pedestrians connect and interact with their surroundings. Walking and travel on public transport provide the opportunity for chance meetings, the

serendipity that enriches life, while people sealed in a car are isolated from society. City centres can be designed for walking among a diversity of activities including houses, workplaces, shops, pubs and cafes, places of worship and public spaces. As Healey (1998) has pointed out, place does matter contrary to the claims of some neo-liberals and advocates of globalisation. Sense of place generates the soul of the city and the principles of a renaissance in city design celebrates that experience. Cities need their unique sense of being a distinct place. Active and engaged citizenship in planning and developing the urban form to meet local needs will begin to shift the trajectory of cities away from the maximisation of profit and consumption towards the well-being of the community. Society needs to challenge the view that the market economy is the only form of socio-economic organisation that can provide for a society (Hutchinson et al, 2002). Cities can be places where the interaction of citizens enables them both to meet their own needs and aspirations and those of the wider community for this and future generations.

     The primary focus of the city is its people, operating at a human scale, rich in symbolism of spaces and places for social interaction and the daily business of life. The relationship and hierarchy of spaces are vital to an urban environment if it is to bring meaning to people's lives. The relationship and hierarchy of buildings is no less vital. Two building traditions in cities have been identified, one Focal and the other Contextual. Focal buildings should represent society and need to re-establish their symbolism. At the same time, a new shared architectural language based on specific localities must be devised for contextual buildings to return to a subordinate role. Places can and should enhance their communities by

providing landmarks in time and space that are perceived as touchstones for the past and present. There is little doubt that a community uplifted by its environment is more socially adjusted, more economically prosperous and more optimistic about the future.

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