

APA CALIFORNIA NEWS

From the APA California President P 3  
 New AICP Inductees P 9  
 2014 Conference Highlights P 10  
 Award Winners P 12  
 CPF Auction Success P 13  
 Legislative Update P 14  
 Planning Services Directory P 16  
 APA California Leadership P 17  
 Election Results P 18

**NEXT ISSUE**  
**Mobility: Cities on the Move**  
 Submissions due November 20; see P3 for details



American Planning Association  
**California Chapter**  
*Making Great Communities Happen*

# CAL PLANNER CALIFORNIA

Planning News & Updates from APA California

The Embarcadero and the San Francisco Waterfront. Source: Perkins+Will

MARC YEBER | VP-Public Information

## Urban Design: Why it Matters

This issue of the *CalPlanner* attempts to address the role of design in city-making. Unlike building architecture, landscape architecture, planning and engineering, **Urban Design** is a practice that requires a construct and a design intervention from several (or all) of the aforementioned professions. It is a process not formalized in its own right, but has become the linchpin to many of the planning functions today.

A mid 20th Century term, urban design germinated from the acknowledgement that the mere act of planning or architecture could not evolve into meaningful *city-making*. It is generally believed that urban design grew out of the 1956 Urban Design Conference Series held by Harvard University. However, the practice dates further back. Ancient Rome, with its gridded streets and water-delivery infrastructure, laid some claim to what we consider basic tenets of urban design. Others point to the Renaissance where Michelangelo, Della Porta, and Palladio all employed planning and architecture strategies that framed urban design principles. Then there is the 19th Century Spanish civil engineer Idelfons Cerdà who developed a framework with which the built form was as much a part of the proposal as the streets they front while the individual experience was as critical as the collective function. More recently, James Corner made the case for Landscape Urbanism by espousing organizing principles that placed an emphasis on landscapes and not buildings. In any case, the philosophy of employing urban design, whether conscious or not, is deeply rooted in city-making throughout civilization.

Urban design since the previous decade has become a more formalized design process that is complementary to the policy and regulatory framework defining much of the planning activity. That said, following are different perspectives on the ways the process functions. For obvious reasons, the articles here only touch upon the topic. But we hope you find it both interesting as a denizen who interacts with urban design and informative as a practitioner who is confronted with the challenges of the built environment.

Happy Reading, **MY**

**FEATURE** | Ric Abramson, AIA & Marc Yeber, ASLA

## Urban Design: Nurturing Civic Pride and *City-Making*

**Meaningful city-making in the 21st century relies on a collective vision and collaborative sensibility that harnesses multiple community resources in a sustainable manner. At least that is the supposed vision. Without a semblance of mutual agreement, building a city or town is reduced to the adoption of a regulatory framework directed at land use, infrastructure or new development. Yet, cities and their environs are living entities that stem from a more complex arrangement of established cultural and economic relationships, available material resources and community ideals. Although difficult to define, the unique composition that is characteristic of each city or town ultimately influences resulting community values and the spaces and programs that bring them to light.**

The nurturing of community, whether directly or indirectly requires actions that address not only the physical form of a street or place, but also the civic mindset. This psychological factor eventually determines “wellness” with respect to livability, economic vitality and overall urban identity. Our legacy for a sense of place is tied to the Roman term of *civitas*, which in a contemporary context is best understood as a community bonding and civic pride. It is shaped from a shared sense of responsibility alongside expectations about social behavior, lifestyle practices as well as forms of work and play. City-making then results from localized patterns of expectations whose arrangement materializes into a discernible civic identity.

**So how does it relate to this question of city-making?** Urban design incorporates formal, aesthetic and program-based strategies established to address the vitality and health of the *civitas*. It is not merely the implementation of plans, guidelines and policies focusing on place-making at a scale that is larger than a mere individual building. Instead urban design involves a greater collaboration of architects, landscape architects, civil engineers, transpor-

tation and infrastructure engineers, sustainability consultants, energy modelers and way-finding specialists who are able to recognize and tap into a greater psyche embedded in each locality, to achieve an individual *civitas*. Thus, Urban Design is far more than a formal discipline; instead it is more accurately a way of thinking that balances (1) site conditions with geographic opportunities, (2) a psychology of scale with prevailing rhythms in the existing community fabric, (3) predominant indicators defining urban character with personal lifestyle preferences, and (4) new forms of sustainable-driven design with localized aesthetics. Whereas on the regulatory side urban design interests have found a home within planning or community

▶P4



INSIDE...

**P2** CA High-Speed Rail Gains Momentum

**P6** Reconnecting Urban Populations to Nature

**P7** Urban Design Trends in the Bay Area

**P8** Two California Cities Receive “Great Places” Distinction



## Urban Design: Nurturing Civic Pride and *City-Making*

development departments, in the private realm it has been far more nomadic sometimes within architecture or landscape architecture firms other times within land use planning offices or urban studios. It defies tendencies towards permanence and denies a disciplinary home in academia or a professional center in practice.

Urban design instead manifests as a design-based intervention through which the civic attitude is cultivated, developed, in a word "fertilized," toward a sustainable pattern of urban-ized wellness. Be it a big city or a small town, city-making requires a healthy community bond linked to legible civic spaces, places, programs and events that promote conversations, foster community enhancements, encourage sustainable growth or reinforce civic pride. Thus urban design is not about regulatory control of the public and private realm through policies, plans and guidelines. It is a collaborative effort undertaken by means of the creative act itself to tap into, support and heighten the urban experience and physical context in service of the *civitas*.

**So why does it matter?** Cities are complex. And urban design actualizes its collective desires and fears within a discernable series of spaces, places and programs. In fact, as a creative-based activity it becomes an essential partner to economic development, environmental sustainability and overall community vitality initiatives. When we speak of pedestrian activated spaces, it should be in support of economic development objectives. When we point to greening efforts, it should be to advance measurable environmental goals. When we create cultural programs, it should be in service of larger social equity agendas. Urban design provides both a framework to explore collective meaning and a medium that brings to light culturally defined spaces that nurture a community's continuing evolution.

This rationale however does not explain the process of applying urban design principles to city-making. Unfortunately, there is an embedded philosophy within local government that policy can only accommodate those strategies that are quantifiable. Performance-based concepts that require qualitative thinking and design acumen are too readily dismissed as too difficult to administer and challenging to verify. Proposals that might emerge from design-based research and site-specific solutions are rejected in favor of rules-based zoning systems that put unwarranted faith in generic standards, criteria and guidelines. Because urban design involves the creative act, by its

own DNA it can never be defined or regulated by means of quantitative requirements or prescriptive recipes in the form of citywide design guidelines. Vision-based urban design makes the intangible, tangible. It brings to light that which cannot be seen otherwise. It allows for the measure of something ordinarily immeasurable. The process of city-making must be understood as belonging to the qualitative realm. And the act of urban design must be captured in the form of situational-based expression that is the result of localized critical analysis and keen design aptitude.

To briefly (and figuratively) illustrate a comprehensive urban design strategy, consider the Embarcadero Plaza and Ferry Building restoration in San Francisco. Anchored by the 1898 terminal building at Pier 1, the Plaza until recently was primarily framed by an engineering solution; first as a street car depot situated in front of the Ferry Building that acted as a connection point for people getting onto and off the ferry, then as a freeway bypass in the mid 20th Century. It wasn't until the collapse of the freeway during the Loma Prieta Earthquake in 1989 that a multidiscipline opportunity presented itself to engage in an urban design program to reconnect the city to its waterfront. Planners updated the Northeastern Waterfront Area Plan and drafted the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act in 1991 to represent the community vision and land use framework. Then engineers designed the F-Streetcar line extension, bicycle lanes and pedestrian waterfront promenade that realized the movement and connection. This was followed by landscape architects who shaped the Market Street terminus space in front of the Ferry Building, the Harry Bridges Plaza, which ultimately provided the programming and interaction. Finally, building architects reimagined and reprogrammed the Ferry Building itself as a hub of multi-function and modal activity and a keystone for civic pride and lifestyle activity. This multi-disciplinary approach was civically transformative by reinforcing social equity and sustainability, regenerating public meaning and authenticity and reconnecting the city with its waterfront.

The function of urban design, whether big or small scale, continually demonstrates a big return in the process of realizing community goals. It is an intervention which does not squarely fit into any particular profession's camp. Rather its application is via a multi-disciplinary comprehensive effort where various aspects of city-making are largely



The Ferry Building through time. Source: SF Gate

interwoven and interdependent on each other for success. It is the product of visual thinkers who are capable of tapping into a civic ethos and translating community aspirations into form and space enriched by meaning and purpose. More than an improvement of district facades, beautification of boulevards or rehabilitation of cultural landmarks, it is an integrated approach that ties all the functions of a city together into a seamless orchestrated performance of civic life and pride. By recognizing that the goal of city-making is to transcend *place-making* by encouraging interconnections of people to places while considering citizenry movement with the physical form and linking the built environment to the natural one, then we start to understand the cultivating principles that make urban design not just another additive to the community's regulatory framework, but an essential ingredient to the growth of a city or town.

**RA + MY**

Ric Abramson is Principal for Work Plays Studio, a design and land-use consulting firm. Marc Yeber is Principal and Urban Designer for Cont-X Studio concentrating on public realm and private landscape projects.

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