

## The Role of Design in City Planning

by MORTON HOPPENFELD

*We must have a reaffirmation of beauty as a community value. The form of the city must be considered from the physical as well as the economic and social view . . . Toward these ends there are few stated philosophies on the function of physical design in city planning. Questions of city form are, by default, going to be answered by those less able to do the job than are city planners. This article seeks to define the role of the urban designer in the planning process and to illustrate the possible implications.*

In city planning's recent past, deliberate efforts to organize the visually perceived city were generally relegated to special places and to a few small-scale projects. In the tradition of the City Beautiful, architects and landscape architects were retrained to design unrelated fragments of the city. The fragments continually diminished in size until the main concern of "designers" was limited to individual buildings on individual sites. Although these practices continue, we are now at the threshold of a new attitude toward the design of contemporary cities.

Little by little, with the increased opportunity to rebuild our cities on a major scale, the realization of the urgent need for a higher order of design is becoming apparent. This higher order of design would begin to relate architectural elements to each other, to natural and man-made environment, and, most of all, to the dynamic aspects of their perception. Involved is the design of buildings, open spaces, vistas, and, ultimately, a basic perceptible pattern for whole areas.

There are a number of ways one might approach the design of the city. One approach, marked by an insidious charm, which seems currently to dominate the schools and professions, is worthy of comment. Essentially, it amounts to the substitution of the past for the present—to the use of outstanding examples of historic urban places as ideals for contemporary designers. An evening with slides and we are transplanted in time and space. The Agora of Athens, the Piazzas de San Marco in Venice, or a market place in medieval Rotterdam—each evokes the proper adulation and conjures up further images. These places certainly deserve our admiration and

study; but as purely visual things, they are insufficient and even dangerous models for emulation. They are products of their own times and the lessons they have for us today cannot be learned by mimicry.

It is quite true that contemporary urban design conceptions do not and cannot stem full-blown de novo. Our concepts of space and forms have been conditioned by the evolution of civilization over thousands of years. Contemporary designers can draw knowledge from a range of previous experiments inconceivable in earlier times. But, however pleasant are city areas of other periods and other places, it must continually be kept in mind that they have emanated from life functions and public spirits different from those of today.

Urban and architectural values are expressions of aesthetic, social, and pragmatic interests. They cannot simply be transplanted, nor can they be expected to last (in total) for eternity. A misunderstanding of the value of historical models results in a pseudo-monumentality, ill-suited to today's democratic man.

There is another, more positive, approach to the design of urban forms. In the growth of a city, there are two broad causes at work: One, the predominant economic activities which have a generalizing effect; and two, the geography, the topography, and the manifold aspects of human behavior, which have individualizing effects. The interplay of both aspects gives a city its unique qualities and should therefore condition its perceptible form. The positive approach suggested here is the one basic to the science of ecology (from the Greek word "oikos," house) and

deals with the mutual relations between organisms and their environment.

Only from this ecological point of view can we come to meaningful urban form. We have to find answers to such questions as: What numbers and kinds of people will use a place? How will they arrive and depart? What activities will they pursue and how will they behave? How does the city grow or change? What are the technical means with which we work? And the basic question, How can design help or impede the processes?

We must have a form that matches the functions we know today and can foresee for the immediate tomorrow. We can only guess about the functions of fifty years hence. Therefore, we must learn to know ourselves and design for our own patterns of behavior and not for some vision of a possibly more dignified but, probably, only imagined behavior.

To pursue this ecological approach, the designer must have an extensive and intensive knowledge of the city he works with. This knowledge and understanding can come about only over time and through the designers' participation in the planning process. This is not to deny that inspirational ideas and fresh concepts of urban form can come from creative minds outside the planning process. But the meaningful incorporation of such ideas, the generation of other ideas, and their incorporation into a sound workable plan, capable of being accomplished, can be done only by the creative mind operating within a broad planning process of research, analysis, and the gamut of implementation procedures.

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The designer then can become effective at all levels of plan decision, from the basic distribution of land uses and circulation systems to the articulation of intimate urban spaces. Only when considered as a whole can economic, social, and aesthetic goals be reasonably achieved.

Design is not something that can be added on to the "functional-economic" city, nor can the reverse process of economic and social rationalization for preconceived design be fruitful. To be truly significant, design must be an integral aspect of the planning process.

### ESTABLISHING THE IMAGE OF A CITY

The unique qualities — Every city or city sector has its own character or at least the potential for it. Often, buildings and landmarks of the past are still with it. We must not depreciate the importance of the past. Here is tangible evidence of the values other men have expressed in the environment. A primary and inexorable problem is to respect and understand history without being servile to it. "Thus a beautiful city will arise, not from architectural masterpieces individually conceived, but from a sensitivity on the part of each successive builder to the values that already exist."

Visualization — Every city has its attractions, its approaches, its centers of interest, and becomes known by them. The

image of a city in the mind of each beholder depends largely on the paths he treads as he moves about in it over the course of time; but for most people, in most cities their image lacks clarity, interest and wholeness. For tomorrow's city, the image evoked must be expanded to offer a continual source of delight and orientation.

A perceptual framework—Previous planning for city areas considered vehicular movement almost exclusively. Sidewalks for pedestrians were a product of streets. Re-emphasis of man's place in the system of circulation must be secured by a plan for pedestrian movement, to work harmoniously with that for vehicles. Such a plan not only provides for an obvious means of getting from place to place, but also it becomes the means by which people learn to know the City.

Cognizance of the whole is a vital aspect in the enjoyment of any visual thing. This is no less true of a city area. To be at ease with a place and to enjoy it fully, one must be able to orient himself and perceive its basic form. From man's eye level only a fragment of the whole area is perceptible at a time; to man in motion, the totality begins to unfold itself as one point of reference gives way to another. The critical cognitive link between the area as a whole and the fragments we usually perceive would be a clear visual framework consisting of special streets, walkways, parks, special buildings, and enclosed spaces. This framework, based on the logic of basic land use and movement patterns, would tie the significant foci together, with vistas down tree-lined streets and broadened sidewalks, each with a degree of uniqueness. As one proceeded from any one point, the system would unfold until a sense of the whole was established. Such a framework would help give discernible form to city areas, large and small, and augment visualization.

### DESIGNING FOR THE ACTIVITIES OF URBAN MAN

It is generally agreed that the best of city plans lose value if the architectural elements are not worthy. There is one particular aspect in this realm of architecture which must have priority of attention: the ground floor of the city. In concept and design, the relationships of buildings to the street and to each other are crucial to the creation of the enclosed, semi-enclosed, and flowing spaces we walk through. The streets,

as we now have them, are inadequate to meet the needs that must be met if the ground floor of the city is to be the functional and symbolic stage of urban life.

The greatest attraction of a city is its variety of activity and the extent to which it reflects and enhances the urban culture. Consistent with this culture, the city should have things to do and to observe as one moves about in it.

In the building and rebuilding of our cities, a new urban scale must be achieved, new kinds of spaces must be created. Within the basic system of streets and walkways previously described, large parcels and whole blocks will inevitably be cleared and rebuilt. New buildings need no longer be bound to a street alone, but must unite the street picture with a whole series of small and large plazas, malls, or terraces. The scale and size of these places must be precisely related to the type of activity they house, whether shopping, sitting, or congregating. The space created must be a function of the activity, the surrounding buildings, and the number and kind of users anticipated if it is to be successful.

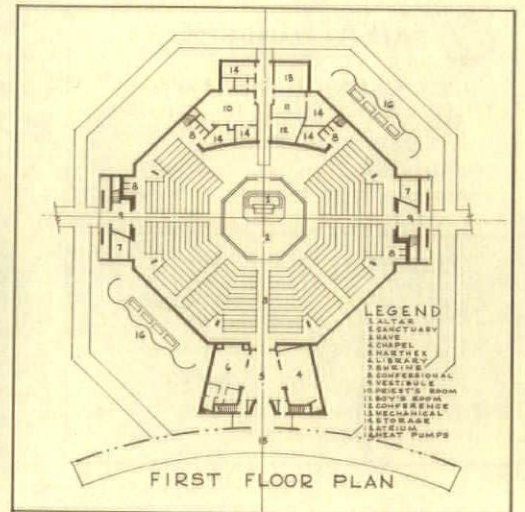
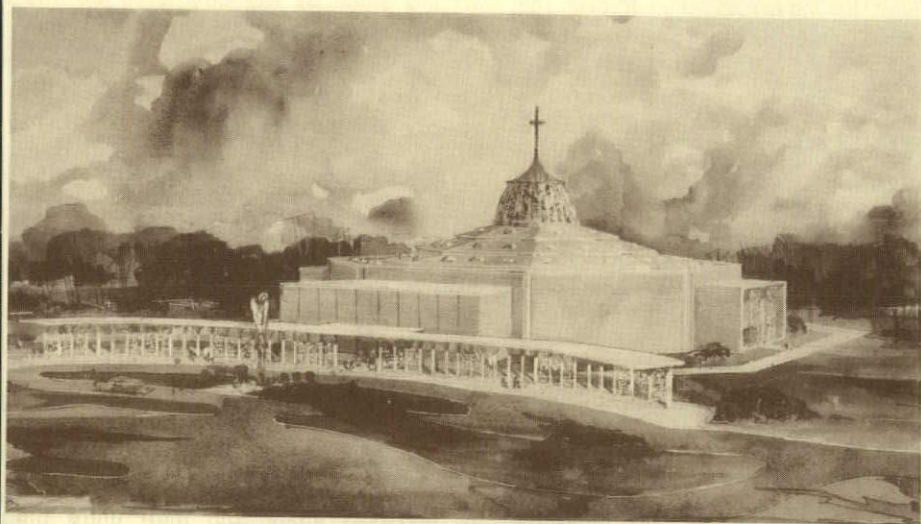
In every way these places, relatively free from vehicular movement, must help to set the stage for human activity. Their design must be carefully considered from every architectural detail to flower arrangement, paving, and lighting, specialized for its own kind of use be it business, shopping or residential.

### CONCLUSION

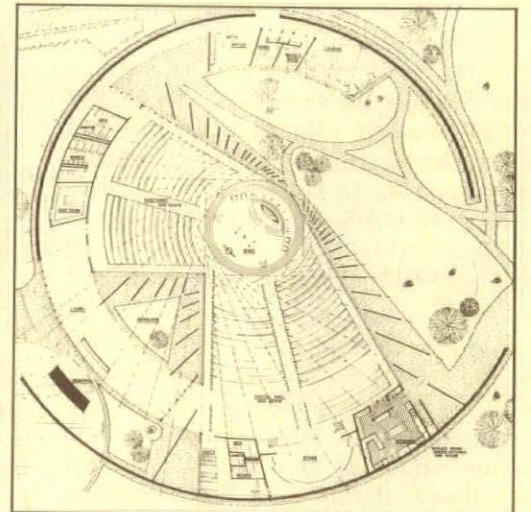
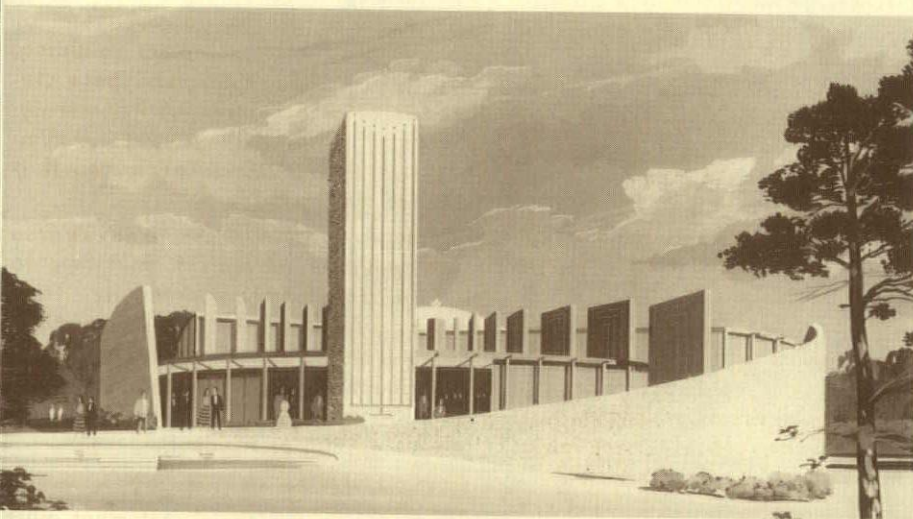
The planning designers' statement must be clear; it must illustrate principles and serve as guide and incentive to future growth, and elaboration in detail. The value of a strong pictorial image of any aspect of the physical plan is great. Planners are beginning to appreciate the need for improved communication of ideas between the analyst and the urban designer, without which neither can develop the plan. Just as planners have striven to alert the public to the need for a comprehensive and long-range view of the city, so must the planners themselves now be alerted to the necessity of integrating design into the comprehensive planning process.

Morton Hoppenfeld is presently civic designer for the National Capital Planning Commission in Washington, D. C. The ideas in this article were crystallized during his two and a half years' service as chief of the special area planning section for the Philadelphia City Planning Commission. His related experience includes five years of architectural design work. He is a registered architect of New York State, an associate member of A.I.P., and teaches design at Howard University.

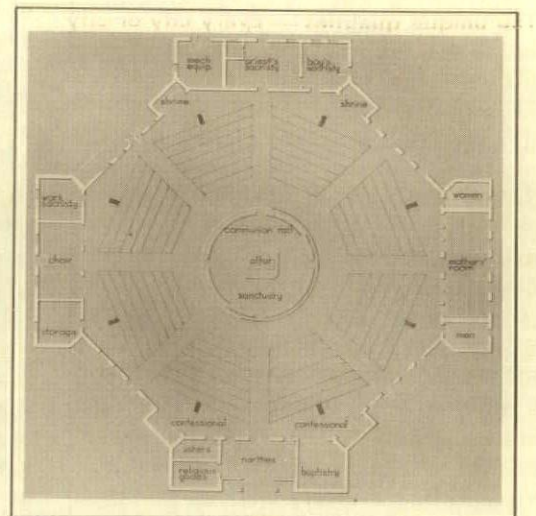
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