

THE CHARTER OF THE NEW URBANISM

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Bio: Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk* is an architect and town planner who cofounded Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company in 1980. DPZ has distinguished itself by designing traditional towns and retrofitting livable downtowns into existing suburbs. In 1991, Ms. Plater-Zyberk helped write a groundbreaking Traditional Neighborhood Development Ordinance for Miami-Dade County, Florida. Since 1995, she has been Dean of the University of Miami School of Architecture. At Miami, she founded a master of architecture program in Suburb and Town Design and has served as Director for the Center for Urban and Community Design. She has a B.Arch from Princeton and a M.Arch. from Yale. She has been a visiting professor at many major North American schools of architecture, has been a Resident at the American Academy in Rome, and is a trustee of Princeton University.

As many of us have discovered working in existing cities, and as Mayor Norquist so eloquently describes about Milwaukee, good design is an important factor in urban health and wealth. The Charter for the New Urbanism, ambitious a document as it may be, nonetheless, is no guarantee of good design. The Charter sets a minimum standard. It tells you what the goals are but not necessarily how to get there.

This is fortunate. Its conceptual nature allows us to continue learning how to do things. For instance, in the section on the region, while mention is made broadly of boundaries and edges, the Charter stops short of specifying the need for “an urban boundary,” a hot-topic at the time of its writing and signing in 1996.

This past year, Congress members meeting with representatives of environmental groups determined that a more acceptable concept for bounding urbanism is “green infrastructure.” Green infrastructure describes a system of conservation interspersed with built areas. Green infrastructure is more complex and responsive to local condition than a single urban boundary, much in the way Benton McKaye described “levees of green to stem the flood of metropolitan growth” back in the 1920’s. Clearly, between 1996 and 1999, the discussion on conservation has been elevated to a more sophisticated vision, which is nonetheless still inspired by the Charter.

The Charter also speaks of the “physical definition of streets and public spaces as places of shared use” and that “streets and squares should be safe, comfortable and interesting and encourage walking.” These might raise the question: But aren’t there a lot of deteriorated urban neighborhoods with a grid of blocks and row-houses facing the streets that would fit this definition? Why should we rebuild failure?

Closer scrutiny of these places of neglect and abandonment often shows they were not well designed to begin with — the blocks are too long, there is no green space for recreation, there is no central place for neighborhood identity, the houses had inadequate plumbing, and so on.

This example again reminds us that the technique of implementation, the details beyond the organization suggested by the Charter principle, are important and that good function is closely related to good design.

So, if the Charter serves to set goals for conservation and development but not the guidelines for implementation, how do we guarantee the best result? How do we produce well-designed places?

The soon-to-be-published Charter Book, which expands on the Charter goals, will enrich the

picture. And the Lexicon likewise is full of design advice spanning the scope from region to streetscape and building. Both documents should augment our efforts to consolidate information and to make knowledge and experience broadly accessible, and both underline the importance of the individual effort in good design.

This morning's session is about places that are well designed, that are made of good design. One might ask how can we even attempt to identify good design when the mere suggestion of valuation is anathema to many in the design professions. Notwithstanding, here are five criteria:

1. Good design is an intentional act which provides an elegant solution to a given problem - hopefully without generating any major new problems of its own.
2. Good design often achieves maximum results from minimum means. It is not a cosmetic addition which can be cut from the budget; it is a process of solution.
3. Good design understands the broader parameters of a problem, beyond those given in a program or superficially evident.
4. Good design is critical of assumptions and cliches.
5. Good design has a healthy respect for history, understanding that some experience transcends time and can be beneficially applicable under new circumstances.

Jaquie Robertson reminded us in last night's talk that design needs to precede and inform policy. Remember, there are three tools involved in the making and remaking of cities: design, policy and management.

We are completing a half-century of policy planning with little attention to design. We have produced innumerable places of minimal function lacking the capacity to instill the human desire to maintain them. The New Urbanism's goal is to change the disposable city syndrome which characterizes 20th century building.

One approach to sustainability is to make places so that people want to preserve them. The truism emerges that design, a holistic vision, should drive policy. But can we New Urbanists deliver design that is good enough? After many years of critiquing sprawl and raising urban design consciousness, with the door opening wide to produce the much-heralded alternative to sprawl, are we ready and capable to deliver?

Are we skilled in the techniques of design? What are those techniques and how do we learn them? In the past decade, we have revived many tried and true design techniques, especially those at the scale of the neighborhood. Some of these now seem immutable:

Optimum neighborhood dimension:

- ¼mile radius center to edge, a five-minute walking distance.

Optimum grid dimension:

- 1/2 mile average maximum block perimeter.
This is less than the typical 330 x 660 block that results from the subdivision of the Jeffersonian mile square grid, implying that urban blocks in many U.S. cities require reduction with additional streets or pedestrian passages.

Optimum street space ratio:

- height to width not to exceed 1:6; 1:1 is preferable. Street trees can compensate for excessive width.

Optimum sidewalk width:

- to match or exceed cartway width (something our European friends have taught us.)

The most pleasing of building facades:

- composed according to a consistent proportioning of solid and void dimensions such as —

1:1, 1:2, 1:3, (the golden section) 1:1.6, Le Corbusier's modulator, and so on.

But how do we learn to put all this together so that it is beautiful, so that preservation policy might evolve to allow a less than 50-year threshold?

My advice is to look to history: look to the places that are beloved, that have never been destroyed or to those that have been carefully rebuilt — the world has an encyclopedia of examples to learn from. They are all made of dimensions and materials we can measure and analyze, learn from, emulate, and be not afraid, even copy!

Our favorite places were made by methods of composition that are time-tested and continue to be true — methods that are lyrical and abstract, geometric and picturesque. Design is not a mystery. It is possible to analyze, reproduce, or translate the beautiful places we already know and love:

Commonwealth Avenue in Boston:

- a precisely dimensioned and coded urban infill development, built out by multiple lot owners.

Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia:

- a mix of high rises, townhouses and civic buildings fronting an urban green.

Regent Street in London:

- an urban redevelopment intended to produce a more direct transportation corridor across a congested city, a potential model for transit corridors being retrofit into suburban cities today.

The models are almost endless. At each of three scales described by the Charter, one can find superior examples:

Region:

- Washington, D.C. of today embodies regional goals for transit and conservation; Rock Creek Park is an example of green infrastructure conserving a natural condition and the Tidal Basin is nature remade into a formal garden.

Neighborhood, District and Corridor:

- Lake Forest and Forest Hills are transit-oriented developments from the early 20th century which have increased in value over time.

Street, Block, and Building:

- Miami Beach shows us that style is an issue; in a city of modern style, continuity and harmony are important. Alexandria, Georgetown, Greenwich Village, and others remind us that dimensional relationships are important.

Beautiful places — some are made totally new, others worked and reworked over time, but hardly ever were they made by accident. In urbanism, what many observers refer to as ad-hoc beauty has almost always been intentionally designed, even if incrementally by individual building effort. Those picturesque English country villages you love to visit were consciously formed with principles and techniques that resulted from analysis and design.

This intentional act, the act of design, envisions three dimensional spaces that people move through and inhabit, spaces that represent social values, respect the underlying nature and foster economy. This kind of design is what is expected of New Urbanists.

As the obstacles of policy are exchanged for the incentives of policy — the result of efforts of the Congress to date — excellence in design will be the next challenge for New Urbanists. Let's be as ambitious in carrying out the Charter as we were in writing it!