

The Role of the Arts in Urban Redevelopment
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GOOD CITIES VS. GREAT CITIES

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A conference on “The Role of the Arts in Urban Redevelopment” suggests any number of topics for a keynote address; and one obvious theme is that of the “Hawaiian Missionary.”

You will recall that the families of the 19th Century missionaries who went out to proselytize the Hawaiians ended up owning the islands. It was said of them that, “They went to do good, and they did very well indeed!”

“Doing good while doing well” could also apply to those buildings that contribute equally to the delight of the public and to the “bottom line” of the developer.

Ever since John von Neumann, the father of Game Theory,

pointed out that, while many people think of life as a “zero sum game” in which any benefit must be at someone else’s expense, we have come to realize that in actual practice, it can be a “positive sum game” in which everyone wins!

Our national experience in urban development is a prime example, especially over the past two decades, during which an increasingly sophisticated public has shown itself not only willing, but eager to pay a premium for beauty and amenity, for buildings that represent not just construction, but architecture, that do not merely occupy space, but fill it effectively, exuberantly, dramatically, and for the benefit of all of us!

Not only are worthwhile buildings sought, but worthwhile urban context as well, leading to cities that aspire not merely to be good, but to be great.

And we are coming to understand the difference.

Great cities, for example, are not only “showcases” for culture but incubators of it as well; they make provision for the

talented, energetic, ambitious young in every field who provide the adrenalin in the civic system.

A great city of the 20th Century would have a crowded, bustling, contagious sense of energy, excitement and human interaction—instead of strangling congestion, choking traffic, swarming sidewalks, blocked sunlight and cut-off views.

It would contain buildings that function well for their occupants and owners, but that also relate well to the streets they face, neighboring buildings, and to the city as a whole.

A great city presents a coherent and civilized environment, a blending of old and new, a distinctive sense of character and of place.

A great city permits a street life of human scale, with opportunities for chance meetings of friends and colleagues, for agreeable experiences on the way to or from one's place of work, at mealtime, or at odd moments during the day. It would have vistas, where a sudden surprise sight of a park or square, a public

monument or a grand building brings a sense of delight that might go uncommented on but that brightens the day.

A great city vibrates with vitality that comes, in part, from variety—variety of ages, occupations, activities, and conditions of life, in many cases with different people doing different things at different times of day or night.

A great city represents a certain symbiosis and synergism, with permanent residents, transients and visitors reinforcing one another, with neither blue collar worker, “yuppie,” entrepreneurial tycoon, government worker nor professional manager dominating or constricting the life of the city, but with all contributing to its quality of life.

A great city boasts public buildings that express community rather than power, buildings that don’t shout “Hey, look at me!” but that are appropriate for a particular time and place and function.

A great city exudes a zest for life and serene self-confidence.

It knows what to do and how to do it.

We are increasingly coming to understand the wisdom of appropriate public encouragement of, and possible involvement in, desirable private development efforts that we want which might not have taken place absent public intervention.

In such a climate, relations between private sector and public sector practitioners could become cooperative rather than adversary, as they are so often today. The public sector might have to become more aware of what the private sector defines as “the discipline of the marketplace” or of, say, the “time-value of money”; and that the private developer may have to become more conscious of what economists and planners call “externalities,” or impacts of our actions on third parties. It could mean that public figures will be encouraged to consider development problems not only from the standpoint of short-term politics, but of long-term economics as well. It may mean that aesthetes will become more prone to consider the social impact of their designs; that social

engineers will be forced to face hard economic problems flowing from their decisions; that planners will have to ask themselves, “Who bears the risks and the pains of failure?”; that architects will focus more clearly on the comfort, safety, and efficiency of the occupants of their buildings; and that all of us may relate more directly to the success or failure of the project as a whole.

The vehicle for such activities will increasingly be seen as a de facto partnership among municipal government agencies, the private developer, the private institutional lender, and other entities such as cultural institutions.

We will need to create means by which risks and rewards are shared, by which each partner has a vested interest in the success of a project, and by which the benefits that flow from it are appropriately apportioned.

In actual practice, for example, the provision of, say, expensive structured parking and similar major infrastructure, costs must be seen for what they are—joint problems requiring joint

solutions.

Such tools as tax-exempt bond financing (to the extent the federal government will continue to permit it), or subordination of real estate taxes to mortgage financing charges, practices such as partial application of tax loss sales proceeds to development capital (once again, at the pleasure of Washington)—must be rethought and used imaginatively where applicable.

Each historical period, it seems, has its characteristic problem resolved by a characteristic solution. In the years ahead, working out the ground rules for successful accommodations among public sector, private sector, financial institution and cultural institution partners deserves the best thinking we all can give it.

Why?

Because the game clearly is worth the candle!

It is not necessary for us to dwell on the benefits of all of this to the private developer, for the simple reason that developers as a sub-species have finely-developed economic antennae and, like

ants at a picnic, they intuitively zero in on a good thing.

Developers do not require exhortation to perceive the economic advantage of bonuses for plazas, atria and so forth from a physical point of view, or the higher rents they may charge for a prestigious building as opposed to a mundane one.

Government functionaries and even the general public, on the other hand, often do not fully understand the dynamics of urban life, the complex factors that make some cities wax and others wane, that make some cities bubble with exuberance and vitality and others bore to tears both their own citizens and the occasional reluctant visitor.

Some factors that affect the “tone” of the city are obvious, such as an exciting array of shopping opportunities, restaurants, hotels and recreational facilities and, of prime importance, major cultural institutions, art galleries, theater districts and the like.

Many of the factors are often not clearly apparent, however,— a sound economic underpinning, for example;

buildings and public places that, like good computers, are “user-friendly”; areas in the city that surprise and delight and perhaps even astonish resident and visitor alike; “walkable” areas that invite rather than repel the pedestrian; cheap and available housing of the bright and ambitious youngsters from elsewhere who come to seek their fortunes; a variety of neighborhoods with widely differing temperaments and characters; the pace and tension of a 24 hour-a-day cosmopolitan center.

And of course, a vital cultural life.

Sometime before he became President in 1960, John F. Kennedy was heard to comment that Washington, D.C. was a major national capital strategically located between our North and South. “And look what we have,” he is reported to have said, “an intellectual backwater with southern efficiency and northern charm!”

Today, when Washington, D.C. is discussed as reaching toward world-class standing in the ranking of cities, references are

made to blockbuster art exhibitions like “The Treasure Houses of Britain” by-passing New York to come directly to the National Gallery’s new East Wing, or to leading international ballet companies, orchestras or plays going directly to the Kennedy Center without stopping further north.

When residents of Houston, say, or Atlanta, wish to indicate the new eminence of their respective home bases, they are apt to point to their major new art centers, just as Australians from Sydney speak proudly of their world-famous opera house or Edinburghers refer to their Festival.

Conversely, Brasilia or Canberra, although capital cities of major nations, attract the attention only of those who have to go there. (In a recent Sunday *N.Y. Times*, a full page discussion of “What To Do In Brasilia,” implied that most foreign visitors fly to that massively planned, immensely expensive capital of South America’s largest country early in the morning and leave by nightfall, but that (in the words of the *Times*), “24 hours or even 48

hours is preferable to avoid a mad rush.” Can anyone imagine that being said of Paris or London, New York or Rome?

The implied questions are fair ones. What would Brasilia need to achieve “world-class” status; and what would, say, New York have to lose to suffer a drop in its standing?

A gradual but perceptible change of status between San Francisco and Los Angeles that seems to be taking place today may be instructive.

First of all, the mood of San Francisco is being seen as increasingly “anti-business.” In the words of the *New York Times*, “business and civic leaders are beginning to question whether the city will continue as the center of business it has been since the Gold Rush more than 100 years ago. . .the Los Angeles area has been growing rapidly as a center of business and finance, sometimes at the expense of San Francisco. . .relations between business people and San Francisco City Hall have reached a low point.”

That the cultural balance seems to be in the process of shifting also is a fact of life. Observers are beginning to think of San Francisco as perhaps our Kyoto or Florence—a gracious and charming place out of the main stream of life.

What the relation is between the two is an interesting question. My own conclusion, in terms of today's discussion, is that the many important business leaders who also lead and support our major cultural institutions are municipal assets of monumental proportions and that they should be treated as such.

We have all learned a lot about what makes cities tick, but one lesson that we sometimes tend to forget is that no city ever became great or stayed great without a solid economic base.

Well, we have been talking of great cities, but it might be worthwhile to close with a brief, but thought-provoking image of an ideal city for the 20th Century.

This ideal city might have a relaxed and civilized meeting place like Venice's Piazza San Marco; a bohemian intellectual

center like Paris' Left Bank; parks like Boston's Public Garden or New York's Central Park, with London's Hyde Park Speakers' Corner and the book stalls by Notre Dame on the Seine thrown in.

It might have the business dynamism of Wall Street; the elegance of the Place de la Concorde; the sparkling waterfront life of Sydney Harbor; the civic pride of the Paris Opera; the imagination of Boston's City Hall, the street activity around the Pompidou Center; the sophisticated complexity of Rockefeller Center; the relaxed graciousness of San Francisco's Telegraph Hill; the majesty of Beijing's Forbidden City, and the nobility of the Acropolis.

Good cities we have; the ideal city may always elude us, although a vision of it should guide us. Great cities are within our grasp if we will them with sufficient intensity and are willing to pay the necessary costs.

And in such process, as we will be discussing today, the Arts will lead the way.

Daniel Rose talks can be found on: www.danielrose.org