The Politics of Design

Norma DeCamp Burns

A registered, practicing architect and former Raleigh City Council member, Norma DeCamp Burns broadly defines the evolving relationship of politics and design. Based on her extensive civic involvement, professional training, and term on city council, she suggests that elected officials and members of the design and development communities work together to understand and recognize the concepts of consensus, context, and suitability in order to create livable cities.

The best architects bring to bear on their architecture the result of travel experiences at home and abroad, augmented by extensive reading in the arts, humanities, philosophy, social sciences, psychology, and building technology. All of these influences are distilled with talent (in some cases, genius) and intuition to create a personal approach to architecture and the world of design. Added to those influences is the architect's education in a particular design philosophy (the modern movement, for example), after which he or she is trained in an office, introduced to preferred construction practices and encouraged to accept a given philosophy of architectural practice.

As a practicing architect, career educator, community activist and elected official, I see the world of design possibilities very differently from some other architects. Because of these experiences, I am not exclusively dedicated to a "modern", "post modern" or "traditional" approach; instead, I determine the best design approach given the particular circumstances. This acceptance of contextual influences also includes the input of citizens, neighbors, clients and others in supplying important design determinants to the development process.

How are Design and Politics Related?

Design and politics are in the process of taking on very different philosophical and practical meanings than in the past. This shift is the direct result of our changing American culture--a national heritage that is moving from a rural to an urban experience for an increasing number of citizens. Even in North Carolina, a state historically characterized by many small towns, few large towns, and even fewer small cities, the trend toward larger cities and economically interdependent metropolitan areas is on the rise.

With regard to "design", architects once viewed their profession as either primarily artistic or more technical. A building was either a statement of personal artistry or a highly-technical product based on bottom line considerations. But architecture must both encompass and transcend these characteristics.

Meanwhile, "politics" was long construed as the effort to convince those in power--heads of boards, agencies or elected officials--that a specific design solution should be accepted. General lobbying tactics included the cultivation of friendships and the application of personal charm and persuasion--attributes not directly relevant to the evaluation of a design. Little effort was made to address the larger issues of community or environmental appropriateness. If zoning or a zoning process existed, its parameters were the sole qualifiers of note.

These attitudes worked well in a time characterized by cultural stability, large supplies of undeveloped land and low population densities. But over the past ten years, higher population densities, rapid social and economic change, and dwindling land supply have created a new situation.

While personal and political alliances still play a role in successful projects, other factors now assume an increasing role in the acceptance process. Today, design has a larger concerned constituency than ever before. Decisions of the designer and developer appear overnight in people's backyards. In an older Raleigh neighborhood, a part of what had

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been considered a public park and permanent green space was suddenly sold and developed. The developer built large new homes that, although complementary to the surrounding neighborhood in size and style, were sited on uncharacteristically small lots and oddly placed in close proximity to each other. The neighborhood swiftly organized to purchase portions of the property contiguous to the public park, and persuaded the city council to contribute

An example of sensitive design: the North Carolina Beer Wholesaler's Association building in Raleigh's historic Oakwood neighborhood.

not bequeathed in the past with full understanding and foreknowledge of the consequences. Disputes commonly occur on the fringes of new development where the project comes into direct contact with different uses. Shopping centers often create nuisances along their edges, where traffic, delivery services and garbage pickup are not adequately buffered from residential uses. Many of these confrontations could have been avoided by sensitively

matching funds. The convincing political argument was that the lot size and site organization was not in character with the larger context of the neighborhood. To impose a new pattern on the edge of the public park would effectively co-opt public space into private back yards.

The personalized impact of proximity has created a new public activism that has frustrated and outraged architects and developers--how dare the untrained, uneducated and unknowledgeable comment on the aesthetic impact of a building or development? What about property rights and the tyranny of the "bottom line"?

Another unsuccessful development effort involved the removal of two small homes in a country club community in Raleigh. Subsequent recombination of the lots resulted in a plan for three very large homes. In this case, not only was the building-to-site ratio very different from adjacent homes-- gracefully located on large wooded lots--but the three-and-one-half story Georgian-style buildings were significantly different from adjacent single- and split-level modern ranch style homes. Although there was nothing in the zoning ordinance that anticipated the problem, neighbors in the area brought a public complaint before the city council. As a result of the delay and adverse public opinion, the project was less profitable than envisioned, and some lots remained undeveloped.

The government may not deny a property owner all reasonable use of his land. However, with pyramid zoning practices drawing wide parameters around collections of very different permitted uses, the courts have ruled that some uses in a zoning category may be denied, assuming the restriction is not unreasonable and can be demonstrated to be for the greater public good. One would assume that the courts understand what every citizen instinctively knows: despite the best intentions of elected officials, zoning was

addressing the legitimate concerns of adjacent neighbors.

Permitted zoning may work against the good of the city transportation system or community appearance. In Raleigh, a heavily traveled thoroughfare was slated for major development in the 1990s. Numerous tracts of land, hundreds of acres large, were poised for new development, but it was discovered that the thoroughfare was already operating over design capacity by thousands of vehicles per day. Further, there were no plans for funding at the state or local level to address existing or impending traffic problems.

In response to public outcry, the government could have attempted to impose a development moratorium. The Raleigh City Council, however, decided that adequate access was in the developer's interest and that some jointly supported solution was achievable. That solution came in the form of an engineering study funded by land owners along the length of the thoroughfare.

The study suggested that a secondary system of connected roads constructed to the rear of the developing lands could provide a parallel accessway and actually reduce the impact on the adjacent thoroughfare. This system was to be provided incrementally by the land owners as each tract developed. Moreover, public concern about loss of treescape along the thoroughfare was addressed by commitments to a streetscape plan and front yard landscaping enhancements. In this way new properties make a positive contribution to the aesthetic, efficient, and economic well-being of the city.

We are entering a new age of interconnectedness, of mutual responsibility for the survival of our environmental heritage and our city's future. From the micro- to the macrolevel, a shift from independence to interdependence is taking place.

"Good design" no longer refers to what I, as an architect,

prefer to see dictated by my personal artistic sensibilities or by the marketplace and functional considerations. Good design makes a contribution on a larger scale--it enhances a neighborhood, reinforces the character of a city block, facilitates the function of an area--in short, it improves the lives of those it touches. Each new development is expected to enhance conditions along its boundaries and not to stress or threaten adjacent properties.

Amazingly enough, this change is about democracy. This is old-style, New England town meeting democracy. It has been agitated into being by our increasing proximity, but it will be made more pronounced by recent and emerging changes in federal and state budgetary practices. Everyone is aware that an age of "Big Government" in our country is coming to an end. The most obvious impact has been federal financial cutbacks and drastically reduced or obliterated funding of state and local programs. Highway, public transit, housing, welfare, community development, and revenue sharing programs have all been affected, as have once tax-sheltered municipal investment vehicles. When direct responsibility for action is placed at the local level, those who share in it begin to demand a voice in the decision-making. No longer is a removed bureaucracy distributing money and dictating expenditures. The electorate, whose tax dollars must be applied at the local level, can now more easily identify themselves as the direct source of funds and have increased incentive to become actively involved in that process.

If basic change is taking place in the practice of governing, how do we as political agents and members of the design/development community make our place in the new order? The following observations may be helpful.

Understand the Power of Consensus

The best designs are those that capture the spirit and time of the place. When people can identify with a development, it becomes an integral part of the community. If people are a part of the process, they will support and defend the outcome as part of their emotional territory. People will work very hard to reach consensus when given the opportunity. The late Thad Eure demonstrated the positive power of citizen involvement when he undertook his last development project on Wake Forest Road in Raleigh. The tract of land was the last remaining greenspace in the area. In a series of meetings, Eure outlined development options, alternative densities, uses and site relationships, and developed acceptable traffic control, tree pro-

The Design Professional as Elected Official

I am frequently asked whether my term of service on the Raleigh City Council allowed me to accomplish what I had hoped, and whether I think that architects and other design professionals play useful roles as elected officials. In terms of my own personal goals, the four years I spent as an elected official were extremely productive. My primary interest politically was directed toward understanding and improving the relationship between the planning and political processes. The concepts embodied within the maze of regulatory material often elude elected officials with busy schedules and little time to commit to unravelling what appears to be a formidable puzzle.

An architect's training, however, focuses on maintaining understanding of problems simultaneously at the macro and micro scales. A building or project concept must develop consistently at the larger conceptual scale, incorporating such elements as solar orientation, topographic and climatic data, site development, road and access requirements, public utilities, construction methodology, functional requirements, visual image--while at the same time accommodating a myriad of specific smaller requirements ranging from the nuts and bolts of structural, electrical and mechanical systems, types of doors and window systems, varieties and characteristics of glass and glazing systems, roofing materials and foundation systems, brick, block, wood, steel or other combinations in wall systems, communications and conveying systems to the minutia of finishes, colors, hardware, furnishings and accessories. The experience of balancing and integrating all of these influences along with satisfying and enhancing the tastes and preferences of a particular client is excellent training for balancing the complexity of city government.

Perhaps the most immediately recognizable skill that design professionals contribute is the ability to understand and accurately assess the many building, development and engineering projects undertaken by both the city and private enterprise. Frequently, the best ideas risk rejection because they are beyond the realm of ordinary expectations. I appreciated the opportunity to support plans for renovations and additions to Memorial Auditorium when a bold and unanticipated addition was proposed. After completion, it is recognized by everyone for its marvelous solution; however, there was a time when that was difficult for most people to perceive.

I was able to accomplish what I had set out to do. It took all of four years to completely revise and rewrite Raleigh's comprehensive plan. It was originally completed in 1979 and it began to change and evolve immediately so that a ten-year rewrite and reorganization was badly needed. I am glad that as a council member, I could offer encouragement, support and some degree of creative professional guidance to Raleigh's fine planning department as they undertook this massive project. It was rewarding to see the project through to completion and to feel that I played a positive role in the process.

-- *Norma DeCamp Burns*

tection and landscaping approaches. When the project was brought before the city council for public hearing, the surrounding residents turned out to commend and support it. The result was a success many would not have thought possible.

True consensus is a win-win situation. It is not a compromise. Consensus means that all parties have found an authentic way to meet their own basic needs in the situation. People should be in-

An example of insensitive infill: the new units have utility connections and garbage cans facing the street, in contrast to the porches on adjacent houses.

oughfares, where the intervening event establishes a comfortable boundary. Elsewhere, the designer must be sensitive to the contact of his immediate surroundings and the need for a non-invasive response. That buildings and developments can be described as "rude" and "insensitive" to context is an indication of the emotionally-laden character of their impact in the urban environment.

volved early in the problem-solving process, so that everyone has an opportunity to be heard. In planning efforts, when months of meetings and planning have gone into a new ordinance or changes to the comprehensive plan, I have observed that citizens who have reached consensus will "circle the wagons" against a selfish or spiteful troublemaker who has refused to take part in the process. A leader's best political allies are those who have been through the process of forging a difficult peace.

Recognize the Importance of Context

No building or development stands alone. Each is a part of an immediate pattern which is part of a larger set of patterns. This is not to imply that sameness and homogeneity across the landscape is desirable. The view from an airplane of the Toronto suburbs demonstrates this point: the urban fabric is comprised of a uniform spread of low-rise structures evenly sprinkled with a smaller number of twenty story towers. The unusual uniformity of this particular cityscape was brought about by ordinances that determined both the height and spacing of taller structures. The result is a boring cityscape.

The key to understanding context can be found in two words: *variety* and *transition*. The larger context of a community or region is vitalized by a variety of experiences--passive areas of green space, places for active recreation, quiet low-density neighborhoods, higher density residential areas that are convenient and secure, areas of intense commercial activity, high-density areas of mixed uses, and convenient public transportation. Cities work best when the areas function in harmony, thus the description of the city as a living organism. Conflict typically arises at the edge of different uses. It is fine for transition to be abrupt at the edges of rivers, lakes, parks, and large thor-

Accept The Concept of Suitability

Building upon the concepts of consensus and context, the issue of suitability recognizes that a perfectly good building or project which may be appropriate, acceptable and appreciated in one location may be highly objectionable in another.

Suitability should not be an issue if the aesthetic expression of a project, its scale, use, function, location and siting have all evolved from a careful assessment of context and an appropriate use of consensus-building. An inappropriate and unsuitable use cannot be explained away, camouflaged, or "designed" into submission, however.

Suitability is an area not sufficiently addressed by the pyramid zoning system. While all uses within a zoning category are assumed to be suitable, a community changes over time, often rendering an earlier zoning decision inadequate to protect the function of the urban organism or the health, safety and welfare of citizens in the immediate vicinity.

The problem of changes in the character of a land use is not limited to commercial uses. For example, some churches, allowed uses in the residential zoning category, have evolved into intense activity centers. Churches frequently aspire to membership in the thousands, with regional congregations. Therefore, modern church facilities have assumed a size and scale comparable with office buildings, schools, and some commercial structures. Weekday and evening activities produce traffic and parking impacts on a scale incompatible with residential uses. One way to address the problem would be to limit church facilities to residential fringe areas where they can benefit from shared commercial parking opportunities and function as a useful buffer in areas of transition. The typical pyramid zoning code does not address such distinctions and their potential advan-

Cary's greenway system, constructed on land dedicated by private development, now contains more than seven miles of public trails.

project or the process. Changes can be made for the good of the whole.

To Elected Officials

Be objective and willing to listen to the staff, the advisory boards, and the public; there may be times when you are the only strength for a weak-voiced citizen. Be consistent in the exercise of planning matters. Addressing items differently from one site to another will often come back to haunt you. Set high standards for your community, your staff and yourself. In particular, let your staff and advisory boards know the standards and goals you seek, and give them room to attain these goals through the budget process, ordinances and other tools available to local government. ■

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tages for all affected land uses. Only a thorough knowledge and understanding of the evolving city can provide adequate solutions to complex problems of suitability.

Often the issue of suitability is more accurately assessed and solved by the inclusion of multiple players, each having an important goal to satisfy. When cities, counties and private individuals combine forces, positive and unexpected solutions may emerge.

An opportunity for cooperation is illustrated by the problem counties encounter in finding suitable school sites. Established residential areas dislike neighboring schools because they generate traffic. Cities face similar difficulties providing parkland and recreational facilities, and both the public and private sector experience problems finding sites suitable for affordable multifamily housing with adequate transportation access to schools and recreational services. A joint venture approach to shared land, facilities and planning could result in greater economy and improved functional facilities for everyone.

Because of economies of scale, planning for larger multiuse ventures can often more easily address issues of suitability. Relatively benign and passive areas buffer intensity and provide flexibility and appropriate transitions between surrounding uses. Infrastructure and transportation issues can be more adequately addressed on the larger scale than is possible within the restrictions of separated and uncoordinated smaller parcels.

Planning Can Effectively Manage Problems of Design and Growth

It is unfortunate that some would cast the regulatory power of government in a solely negative light. It is true that regulation can be misused, and punitively restrictive, shortsighted and misguided. But it is also true that land use and design-related regulations formulated in an environment of civic consensus, awareness of context, and commit-

ment to suitability can offer clear guidance for creative architects and developers in producing economically successful projects enthusiastically accepted by the community. Several emerging regulatory approaches, including impact fees and overlay districts, are being introduced in the Triangle area.

Judiciously applied, overlay ordinances can encourage and direct positive change and desirable development, as well as preserve existing features of an area. For example, in Raleigh, development of a Neighborhood Conservation Ordinance Overlay was a long and hard-fought process. After a series of infill battles had been brought before the city council, it became apparent that issues of context, suitability, appropriateness and transition were outside the realm of existing zoning. The overlay was developed to provide an organizational vehicle for consensus-building in preparation for infill development in older, largely developed, stable neighborhoods. At issue was the maintenance of neighborhood appearance, scale, character and general quality of life. Although the ordinance was resisted by land owners and developers--seeking to maximize their future development options--the ordinance was an effort to promote compatible development in ways that would benefit the entire community. Currently, the ordinance is being tested by application to its first neighborhood by request of the residents. The consensus of individuals from the broadest possible backgrounds with a mutually beneficial community vision is the key to the success of the overlay district ordinances.

All players participating in the planning process should understand that regulation built on consensus serves the greatest public good. Regulations are systems created out of human need and the expertise at a particular moment in time. As life changes, so should our regulations. Only by continual vigilant response to public consensus, contextual influences and suitability can designers and public officials successfully create livable cities. ■