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WORKING THE MIDDLE \$ SCALE

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Downtown Seattle skyline
Photo: Todd W. Bressi

This essay was prompted by a request to do a review of Mark Hinshaw's book, *Citistate Seattle*. More specifically, I was asked to contrast and compare the smaller-scale focus of his book with the larger-scale focus of my book, *Common Place*. This is a worthy and timely question as Seattle soars to new economic and cultural heights, and I will engage it obliquely in a letterly way.

Mark Hinshaw's book (and David Sucher's earlier *City Comforts*) has highlighted for me and perhaps others the difference between a strategy of urban microsurgery and one of grander planning. This dichotomy is not unique to Seattle, but it does make for an interesting discussion as this good and livable city transforms itself into a great and distinguished city—if, indeed, it wants to be great and distinguished. That may be the bigger question, because I contend that it different and more difficult to for a place to become great than to become livable.

First, let me say that Seattle is doing as well as any American city at making itself livable, attractive and vital. Hinshaw has uncannily, with sensitive antennae and writing skill, put his journalistic finger on exactly where and precisely how it is succeeding and failing. He hasn't missed a place or subject and his debunking of five myths about Seattle—rain, coffee, company town, flannel shirts and its phobia for Californians—in the introductory thumbnail sketch is brilliant.

But is Seattle acting and thinking big enough for all its recent wealth and energy? Certainly, its private sector leaders at Microsoft, Boeing, Starbucks, Nordstrom and REI are thinking big about market share if not dominance. But they are thinking big in ways less and less local and more and more global. Corporations that come to the metropolitan area to mine its favorable lifestyle may later move on to greener pastures elsewhere after they have consumed this

latter day resource—much as entrepreneurs and speculators once depleted the area of fur, coal, timber and fish.

Mayor Schell is eminently capable of thinking big about the public sector. But the Lesser Seattle syndrome, so passionately moderate and resistant to making bold or visionary moves, continues to hobble efforts to build a city that exceeds the sum of its parts. It has allowed a city to develop a strong chorus but few world-class soloists, i.e. a relatively high average in its architecture and neighborhood fabric, but few masterpiece buildings, streets or squares.

There are some fine individual buildings to be sure, but I can only think of a few truly memorable streets (parts of Broadway, lower Madison, Lake Washington Boulevard, Alki Avenue, Fifth Avenue, First Avenue, in Pioneer Square and around the Public Market, which, ironically, is the only place downtown where the view corridor to the bay is blocked). As for larger-scale unity and coherence, I can only think of the University of Washington campus, the Olmsted necklace of parks and possibly Seattle Center (more a family room than a living room, as one of Hinshaw's essays generously calls it). The city's infrastructure of great bridges, locks, stadia and highrises are essential but insufficient elements of a great city.

As Hinshaw points out, the state and region have thought and acted boldly and courageously about growth management and environmental issues. The Vision 2020 proposal remains a model for modern citistate planning. The Sound Transit project is regional in scale and mode, as is the mountain-to-sound greenway. Regional governance may be a long way off, but a regional mentality is emerging. The next step is some sort of regional revenue sharing, which will allow the metropolis to concentrate on competing against other citistates rather than be distracted and drained by local municipalities fighting each other for tax base. There is also a

TRANSECT → SEATTLE



healthy devolution of municipal power to its neighborhoods, of which Seattle has good reason to be both defensive and proud. And there are the myriad smaller-scale urban and architectural moves that *Citistate Seattle* chronicles so well.

It is the middle scale that is weak—the scale of the erstwhile, ill-fated Seattle Commons (which wouldn't have cost the public much more than the sliding roof at Safeco Field) or the scale of the Interbay 2020 proposal in my book or even the scale of Sand Point. Other middle-scale projects might include robust plans for the city's variegated edges, where the land meets the water, e.g. the central waterfront, the shores of Lake Union and the ship canal, which could become a major live-work corridor.

Working the middle scale is very different downtown than in the neighborhoods. Downtown needs more institutional, honorific buildings that are figural at eye level, as opposed to the highrises that cut a strong figure from a distance. The new city hall and library will presumably relieve the grid of commercial buildings, which real estate pressure to maximize rent fortunately pulls out to street, where they belong urbanistically. Surface parking should be taxed or zoned out of existence.

Many Seattle neighborhoods, on the other hand, work well at the middle scale. Each of us finds a niche on the continuum of order to chaos, some liking more uniformity and some preferring more variety. Residential areas in America, alas, come in two extremes: the architectural riot of most older neighborhoods with houses of completely different styles and massing or the architectural monotony of a color-coordinated subdivision or garden apartment complex. In Seattle, you often get a balance of coherence and surprise. Parts of Queen Anne, Ravenna, Wallingford, Capitol Hill, West Seattle and Mt. Baker achieve that leafy American har-

mony without being as repetitive as, say, Georgian London.

Why can't civic leaders muster a majority of the citizenry to go for and pay for something bigger than a single building? Is it because endless rounds of citizen participation cancel each other out? It reminds me of my least favorite personal shopping habit—continuously buying lots of little things rather than saving up for a major purchase. Nibbling is so much easier when shopping; and urban nibbling is so much safer than dining on risky, ambitious and comprehensive projects. Seattle is rich enough to build high quality, architecture and invest in long-term urbanism. It's a city with developers rich and enlightened enough to break the stranglehold of insidious contemporary investment attitudes, born of discounted cash flow, net present value and internal rate of return.

In future columns, I urge Mark to take a tougher angle of attack on his beloved city—more meat and less sweet. This may be easier said from afar than done in your hometown, but Seattle's design community, the friendliest and most convivial I've ever experienced, could handle more public candor. His chapter five, "Why Aren't There Any Great Buildings in Belltown?" is the kind of thing the readers need more of as Seattle develops the cultural confidence to bar less holds in its public discourse.

I, too, love Seattle; I miss it, still feel invested and someday want to live there again. Nonetheless, I'd like to see it aim higher in the planning, design and construction of its built environment. It can't leave all its small moves to the market and all its grand moves to nature, whose beauty and grandeur have left many people feeling that such thinking is either hopeless or pointless or just plain too difficult. Seattle, if you want to join the ranks of great cities, it's time to think big, invest long-term and act decisively at all scales, including the middle.