Richard Dagenhart

Projects

"One of the unsuitable ideas behind projects is the very notion that they are projects, abstracted out of the ordinary city and set apart. To think of salvaging or improving projects, as projects, is to repeat this root mistake. The aim should be to get that project, that patch upon the city, rewoven back into the fabric – and in the process of doing so, strengthen the surrounding fabric, too."

— Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Cities
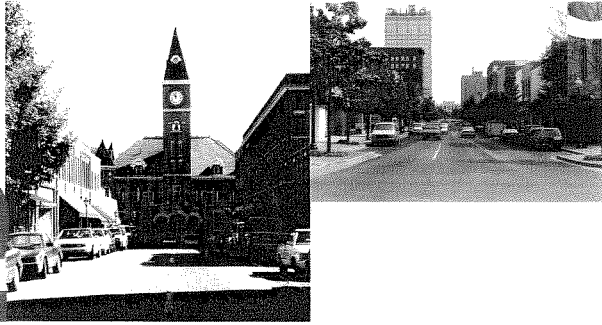
Not so long ago, the building of towns and cities in America followed a commonly recognized pattern. Citizens agreed, even if tacitly, how they would build their towns and how towns would appear. A clear and orderly framework of streets, blocks and lots related many different buildings, activities and people.

Now, we build cities mostly by building big projects – convention centers, sports arenas, civic centers. Often, these projects conflict with older downtowns and neighborhoods. Sometimes the problem is size: the project may be too large to fit comfortably into the older arrangement of streets and blocks. More frequently, the problem is the design of the project itself, and how the project relates to its surroundings. One of the most pressing challenges of city design – and one that underlies many of the issues mayors bring to the Mayors' Institute – is to discover how to weave these big projects into the city.

Left: City Hall, Athens, Ga.
Courtesy Richard Dagenhart.
Background: William Penn
plan for Philadelphia.
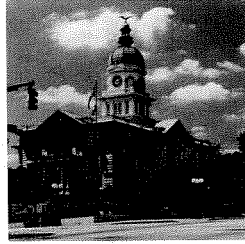
Building Cities

The traditional process of city-building was simple. Landowners subdivided large holdings, often farmland, into small blocks surrounded by streets. Blocks were subdivided further into small lots. Alleys often bisected blocks to give access to the rear of each lot, while streets provided access to the front. New subdivisions of land extended the town, adding new streets and blocks to existing ones.

Merchants bought lots in the center of town to build buildings for their businesses. Small builders purchased lots and built houses, at most a handful each year; a few built commercial buildings to lease or sell. Churches bought one or more lots for a small sanctuary; then, after a few years, purchased more for the minister's house or an education building. Cities acquired land, sometimes entire blocks, for city halls and other public buildings.

Houses, commercial buildings and civic structures followed simple conventions. Houses had facades and front yards that joined the street; house lots had boundaries marked by fences or hedges. They also had backs and private backyards, sometimes with carriage houses or garages next to the alleys. Storefronts met the sidewalk, back doors led to alleys for deliveries and common sidewalls joined one commercial building to the next. Government, churches and other institutions built free standing buildings, often sitting in the center of blocks. One could easily identify these institutions, if only because their buildings

East Point, Georgia Next Stop, Downtown

Residents of East Point, a city of 34,000 about five miles south of downtown Atlanta, are proud of their city's identity as a livable small town in a sprawling metropolis.

Until recently, East Point's compact downtown was affectionately called "Convenience Point." But ten years ago, the construction of a MARTA transit station began a sequence of single-purpose projects that destroyed the once vibrant downtown.

Transit construction displaced 126 businesses, and only twenty-six reopened. MARTA built its parking lot, bus drop-off and kiss-and-ride lanes on the side of the station opposite the retail district, separating transit riders from downtown.

The city hoped to attract a regional commercial center on two superblocks of newly vacant land and formed a Downtown Development Authority. Expecting increased traffic, the city agreed to close its most important east-west street, eliminating a 100-year-old railroad crossing and turning two major north-south streets into a one-way couplet. When no commercial developer appeared, the city and authority promoted other ideas, including an aquarium and an international village, believing that a big project could solve downtown's problems.

The recently elected Mayor Patsy Hilliard brought East Point's downtown problem to the 1994 Mayors Institute on City Design: South. At first, the resource team

believed that downtown suffered mostly from a weak economy and a noncompetitive location. But one panel member asked Hilliard, a California native, why she lived in East Point. She and her husband had looked at several areas in Atlanta, she explained, and chose East Point because it was a livable, small community with a clear identity within a larger urban region. The team member said: "Mayor, listen to what you just said and act on that. Do things to make your town a good

differed from the domestic and commercial structures nearby.

This kind of city making happened because decisions about how to build existed within a pre-defined framework of streets, blocks and small lots. In colonial New England, where land holdings derived from royal land grants, property subdivisions for towns were usually informal, following medieval land subdivision and tenure practices. Many early towns in the Spanish Southwest generally followed the Laws of the Indies, which set out rules for arranging streets and blocks around a central plaza.

Gridiron plans were common in the Midwest and Northwest. Some cities reproduced simple versions of William Penn's well-known plan for Philadelphia. Others made pragmatic subdivisions of the Northwest Land Ordinances, reducing mile-square sections into smaller grids of city blocks. Sometimes, the town plan was only a diagram for land speculation, such as the railroad towns that reproduced themselves at each depot.

Occasionally, cities were designed completely, like James Oglethorpe's Savannah or Pierre L'Enfant's Washington, D.C. Yet even these cities were highly crafted elaborations of the traditional conventions of city building, weaving new ideas and solutions to new problems into the context of tradition.

Later, Olmsted's plans for towns and suburbs substituted a naturalistic looking landscape of curving streets and blocks for the typical grid. Nevertheless, he maintained conventional land subdivision practices using streets, blocks, alleys and lots, along with his new ideas for parks and parkways.

John Nolen's town plans in the 1920s made clearly defined and functionally distinct neighborhoods, civic centers and commercial districts. Still, he used the traditional framework of city building to bind these separate parts compactly into an overall city plan.

This traditional way of building cities, although seldom an art form, continued for so long because it reflected broad agreements about how citizens imagine, build and live in their cities. We seldom recognize that it was this simple framework of streets, blocks and lots that allowed such an abundant variety of towns and cities in America.

This urban framework, which always existed before individual buildings, made it possible to relate the many different parts of the city together – old and new, big and small, public and private, natural and artificial.

Case study illustrations: Left: MARTA station and parking lot. Below: Georgia Institute of Technology studio proposal for downtown East Point. Bottom: University of Georgia studio proposal. Courtesy Richard Dagenhart.

place to live and everything else will take care of itself."

The resource panel recommended several actions to undo the single-purpose projects and make downtown more livable. Change one-way streets back to two-way. Reopen the street across the railroad tracks. Put MARTA parking and bus drop offs on downtown retail streets, not in the parking lot. Get the banks, churches and East Point 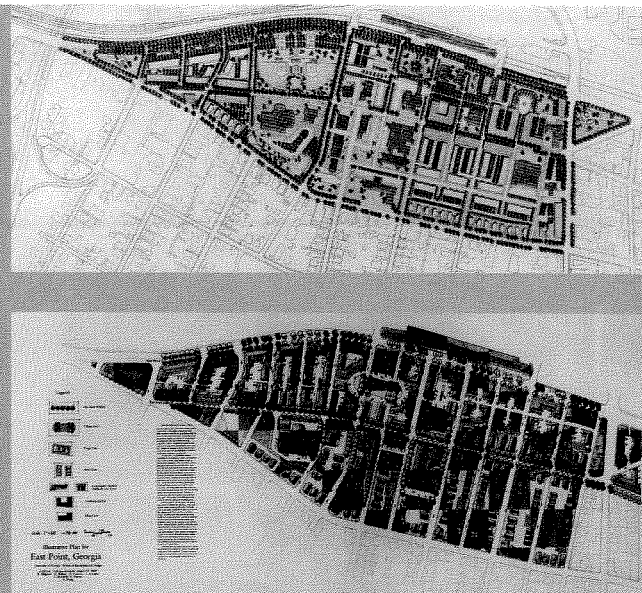residents involved. Use the city-owned vacant blocks as a park or subdivide them into small blocks and lots for small shops and housing. In short, make downtown back into what it was — the center of a small community.
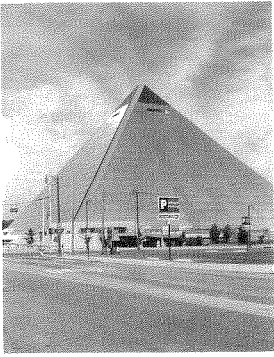
Hilliard has set new directions for downtown. She convinced the authority to delay a new redevelopment plan until citizens could get involved. Architecture and landscape studios at Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia prepared alternative urban design proposals. In town meetings, a consensus emerged to eliminate one-way streets, and Hilliard is working with Georgia DOT to make the changes. Discussions with MARTA and the railroad are upcoming, and a new planning process will begin soon. Hilliard is now working enthusiastically to plan and build a downtown for her small town, not a big project to make a big city.
— *Richard Dagenhart*

Above: The Pyramid arena, Memphis, Tenn. Courtesy Richard Dagenhart. Background: Frederick Law Olmsted plan for Riverside, Ill.

Building Projects

We still build within this older framework, filling vacant lots and replacing old buildings with new ones. However, since World War II, an increasing amount of public and private investment has been going to bigger and bigger projects. Cities of all sizes have them or dream of them: festival markets, convention centers, arenas, performing arts centers, and downtown housing communities.

Public officials, developers and citizens often believe that big projects like these will help their cities compete for shoppers, tourists, conventions and more development, or make downtown a more attractive place to live and work. They conclude that big problems or big opportunities need big investments, and that big investments promise big profits, big tax revenues and a lot of new jobs.

Big is not bad, but big projects present cities with difficult design problems. When compared with traditional city-building practices, these problems become more clear.

Projects are large. Big projects often conflict with the small city blocks that worked best for small buildings built one at a time. Often big projects erase streets and blocks to assemble large land areas. Even when a project occupies only one block, parking lots and loading docks may take up half or more of the site, creating blank spaces on public streets.

Projects have single or limited purposes. A building on main street had multiple purposes. It made the street a civic space, cooperated with its neighbors

to build a continuous row of storefronts and included space for stores, offices or even housing. Today, most big projects concern themselves only with their own internal needs, budgets and schedules. The more a project focuses on its own criteria for efficiency and economy, the less it is concerned with how it might foster relationships between old and new, inside and outside, people and places.

Projects look inward, only to themselves. Early in the century, buildings like downtown hotels showed how a big project could meet its needs on the inside and the city's needs on the outside: shops, offices or display windows lined public streets, and the architecture expressed the project's significance at the most casual and monumental levels. Today, big projects like arenas (and, increasingly, office buildings and new hotels) turn themselves outside-in, revealing only ramps, elevators and service areas to the city.

Projects have barriers that exclude or buffers that separate. Traditional apartment buildings often had courtyards opening to the street, giving residents both privacy and direct connections to their neighbors. Today's urban apartment projects, usually segregated by income or lifestyle, separate themselves with gates, high fences or walls to protect the private backs of inwardly facing buildings.

Projects are isolated fragments. Urban renewal programs often assembled blocks and closed streets, encouraging new buildings to be independent from the rest of the city. We still build many big projects the same way, erasing or ignoring the old framework of streets and blocks. Empty park-

The new Greensboro Coliseum is the envy of many cities. It is among the 20 largest facilities of its type nationally, with a 23,000-seat arena, a 2,500-seat theater, a 300-seat town hall and 120,000 square feet of exhibition space. The recently-completed project involved a $47 million expansion of the old War Memorial Complex, about two miles southwest from downtown.

The Coliseum illustrates the best and the worst of big projects. It skillfully combines several functions into a single complex, with a dramatic landscaped ramp from the 5,000-space parking lot to the main entrance. Sports teams, conventions, trade shows and the community praise how well the facility works, even during simultaneous events.

However, because the Coliseum ignores its surroundings, it could be anywhere. And the neighborhood next door wishes it were somewhere else: the shortfall of parking on site often forces Coliseum-goers onto nearby streets for parking.

Mayor Carolyn Allen, who attended the 1995 Mayors' Institute: South, brought two key concerns: First, how could the city address the overflow parking, a source of neighborhood complaints? Second, how could the estimated 3,000-space parking deficit be solved?

The resource team warned against confusing design and management issues. The parking overflow and deficit, it suggested, were manage-

ment problems. The city could increase parking fees, find underused lots elsewhere and run shuttle buses. Tough on-street parking restrictions, permits for local residents and neighborhood watch programs to catch violators could stem the overflow. If more parking were needed, it should be built as part of an overall plan for the area so it is shared, rather than used only during peak times.
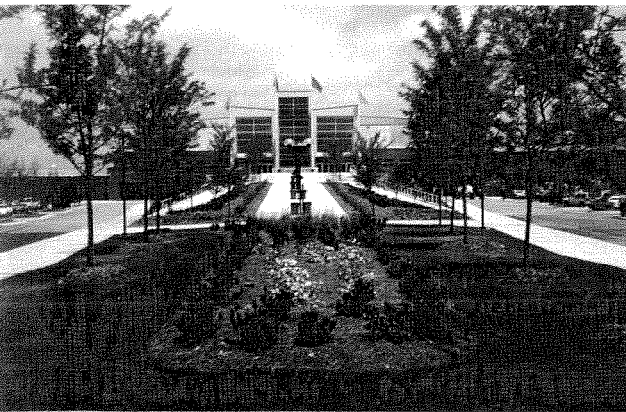
The design of the boundary between the Coliseum

and the neighborhood was a more important issue than parking in determining how the Coliseum fits into the city, the team argued. One member observed that the existing single row of street trees would never make an effective boundary because of the extreme scale difference between the parking lot and the neighborhood.

Instead, the panel suggested, the parking lots could be redesigned as a series of boundaries. One step would be to replace the

ing lots or vacant buildings are common sights around big projects.

If the issues mayors bring to the Mayors' Institute are any indication, both downtowns and suburbs face similar problems. In the city, the challenge is to re-imagine big projects, finding ways to weave them into the streets and blocks of older downtowns and neighborhoods. On the periphery, however, the challenge is to find new frameworks – perhaps highways, parkways and greenways – that bind big projects like malls, office parks and apartments into new civic wholes.

Case study illustrations: Left: Ceremonial entrance to the Coliseum, Greensboro, N.C. Below: Plan of Coliseum site and surrounding area. Courtesy Richard Dagenhart.

streets that had been vacated to create the Coliseum site. These would be real streets, with sidewalks, trees and lighting, and they would connect to equally well designed streets in the adjacent neighborhoods. As a result, the neighborhoods would insulated from the Coliseum by streets and blocks at the scale of the traditional city.

Each new block could be a small parking lot, the panel said, surrounded by small walls that would contain the parking and make boundaries, like buildings along the sidewalk. One panel member suggested that if the 5,000-space parking lot were designed like a traditional city, with streets and blocks, it ultimately could be used for many things: festivals, streets that would be safe (most of the time) for children to bicycle along, flea markets, and maybe even a park in the parking lot.

After the Coliseum operates for a year or so, Mayor Allen is planning to work with the School of Architecture at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to explore some of these recommendations in more depth.— *Richard Dagenhart*

Cities and Projects

Mayors, city councils and citizens alike are becoming more cautious about these big projects. One concern is size. Mayors wonder if big projects, calling for large public investments, will deliver promised results or not. St. Petersburg Mayor David Fischer, calling the big project "the big fix," now argues for incremental development. Mayor Elihu Harris of Oakland is looking for ways to extend the city's successful incremental downtown development to neighboring areas.

Another concern is the design of the big project. Mayors, like Patrick Henry Hays of North Little Rock, are enthusiastic about their big projects because they are confident they will yield big benefits. However, knowing the missed opportunities of Thunderdomes and Pyramids, they also want to know that the rest of their downtowns will be improved as well.

Small and large cities around the county are trying to weave and reweave many different kinds of projects into the older framework of their downtowns. Some of these cities, like Baltimore, Portland and Chattanooga, have been at work for a decade or longer and offer visible evidence of ways to build cities with projects. Some clear design principles are emerging from these experiences.

Multiply project purposes. Several years ago, one strategy for making projects better for cities was changing single-use buildings to mixed-use developments. However, they were often just as isolated as single-use projects and made no contribution to their surroundings either. Current strategies emphasize multiple purposes, not just mixed uses, and multiple users as well.

When users become the focus of attention, project purposes multiply. Where people are going and what they do at their destination is less important than how they get there and what they do along the way. Uses can expand to respond to opportunities in the area, not just the project itself. The project can be designed to make streets attractive for pedestrians, parades and other civic events.

Turn projects inside out. Inward looking projects have been recognized as problems for a long time; ironically, remedies have emphasized interiors, too: winter gardens in office lobbies, historic-looking shopping mall arcades and pleasure gardens in the center of office parks.

Reversing these projects requires three related actions. First, spaces not tied totally to the interior should be turned outward. Second, parking and other means of arrival should be disaggregated from the project and distributed widely around it, so that visitors weave many routes to the project, supporting businesses and making surrounding streets more secure. Third, the entry should not be an efficient movement channel just to get many people quickly into a big interior, but an important civic space for the surrounding city.

Design boundaries, not barriers or buffers. Robert Frost's "The Mending Wall" described the traditional role of a boundary by observing that "Good fences make good neighbors." Surprisingly, some recent public housing modernizations, perhaps

North Little Rock, Arkansas   The Arena as Citizen

Camden Yards and Jacobs Field are well-known new baseball stadiums that successfully fit into older downtowns. Baltimore and Cleveland are not alone — cities of all sizes are proposing new downtown sports and entertainment facilities to stimulate economic development and introduce new energy. Making their new projects as good as Camden Yards and Jacobs Field is the concern of many mayors.

North Little Rock Mayor Patrick Henry Hays attended the 1995 Mayors Institute for City Design: South looking for ideas about making the arena planned for his downtown a civic building project that will amplify the progress that has already been made. For example, the oldest and poorest downtown neighborhood has been designated a historic district; Main Street is reawakening with a focus on arts and retail activity; and a 1.5-mile waterfront park is under construction.

The arena, planned jointly by the mayors of North Little Rock and Little Rock, will occupy a prime location. It will be on the east end of the new waterfront park, between the levee and the river, and only one block from Main Street. On one side a freeway will provide direct automobile access; on the other, an old railroad bridge offers future transit connections to downtown Little Rock.

The resource team argued that the city needed an overall downtown urban design strategy to bind the arena to a

the most difficult projects of all, reveal how big projects can be redesigned using boundaries instead of buffers and barriers to define territories.

Boston's notorious Columbia Point project was remade into Harbor Point using two key design strategies that could be used to rethink many big projects. The first was to weave a new grid of streets and blocks to eliminate the old superblocks. This new grid created multiple boundaries at the scale of blocks and buildings. The second was to make private spaces for each town house and common open spaces for each apartment building. Every space has defined role; each is clearly either mine, yours, or ours.

Design cities before designing projects. Chattanooga is an example of a city that places city design before project design. Before the Tennessee Aquarium was even an idea, the city made two important decisions. First, a continuous park along the Tennessee River created a new regional framework, connecting the city to the river at many points, most importantly at Ross's Landing in downtown. Second, the original framework of downtown streets and blocks became the means to connect the traditional business center of downtown to Ross's Landing.

The aquarium idea emerged to join these old and new urban frameworks and to be a key element for building the city's new tourist and service economy to replace its rust-belt past. The Tennessee Aquarium was never thought of as a "big fix" by itself.

Mayors and Cities

An important lesson from the tradition of American city building is that a public framework of streets, blocks and lots always preceded the building or the project. It is the prior framework, either a simple grid diagram or an elaborate city plan, that allows one building to relate to another, one business to another and one project to another. The framework, not its buildings or projects, binds the city into a civic whole.

We may argue about the size of new projects, their architectural design, or the urban framework itself. Some will prefer grids of small streets and blocks. Others will seek looser arrangements that join local or regional landscapes. As the size of projects increases and as cities continue to decentralize, we may need to rethink the frameworks we use, just as Olmsted added parks and parkways to address the evolving city a century ago. But the framework itself cannot be excluded if our cities are to be more that just accumulations of big projects.

Many mayors attending the Mayors' Institute are suspicious of big projects. They ask questions and want ideas about how to design, or redesign, them. This is encouraging evidence that America's long tradition of city-building may yet survive the "big fix" of the big project.

Case study illustrations:
Left: North Little Rock study area.
Below: North Little Rock waterfront, with railroad bridge to the left, arena site in the center and freeway bridge to the right.
Courtesy Richard Dagenhart.
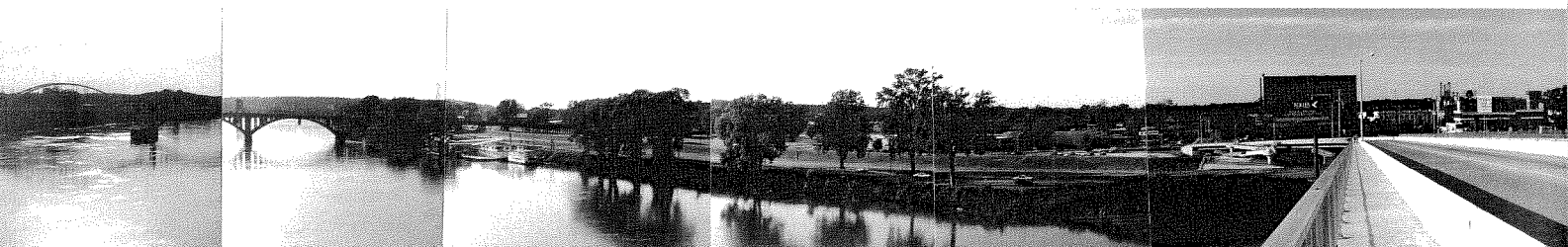
larger "river district." The key is the street network: existing streets and blocks should be kept and improved, streets removed during urban renewal should be put back. The team agreed with the mayor that these streets should extend through the levee (movable gates would provide flood protection), making the river park part of downtown.

The team then suggested turning the arena inside out, so as many activities as possible face streets. Concessions and restaurants could serve both the arena and passersby; leasable office space could be built on the perimeter of the arena, making a more intimate architectural connection to surrounding spaces. The team noted that distributing parking in small lots and avoiding skybridges would encourage pedestrian activity on the streets.

The team recognized the importance of the direct transit connection to the Little Rock Convention Center across the river. However, it urged that the transit line arrive on downtown streets or the River Park, not right in front of the arena.

Finally, the team recommended that the arena have direct access to River Park, so that activities on the river will directly relate to activities in the arena. One team member suggested the idea of a civic "balcony" connecting the arena to the river, so that it would be used not just during events but at other times, too.

A recent countywide referendum approved a one-cent sales tax to finance the arena. Mayor Hays is working with the Donaghey Project for Urban Studies and Design, an outreach center at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, to prepare detailed urban design plans for downtown, the River Park and the arena before detailed architectural design begins.
— *Richard Dagenhart*