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Places

Title

Caring About Places...

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8xt0q7db>

Journal

Places, 10(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1996-01-15

Peer reviewed

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Cities come in
all sizes and flavors,
not just big and apple.
Our cities — urban,
suburban and rural —
are as varied
as ourselves,
and in as much need
of cultivation.

Cities, in all their abundance and disorder, give structure to the lives of most Americans. That they are the skeleton of our civilization tends to be obscured by the popular fixation on large city—regions and the spine-chilling organizational problems they entail. The Big Apple promotional caricature for New York City reaches deep into America’s ambivalence about cities. Manhattan (read “city”) is both alluring and dangerous; the delectable forbidden fruit whose consumption is reputed to banish us from paradise.

Yet cities, as political entities of whatever scale, are a means of assembling public good. They provide essential services, establish the framework for entrepreneurial efforts and promote and protect knowledgeable civic conduct. As physical entities they should do no less and can do more — they can create, as they have so often in the past, places that will enhance the daily lives of their inhabitants and help secure the bonds of citizenship.

To become places about which people can care, cities need leadership and commitment. They need citizens who will stand up in their neighborhoods, administrators who will be attentive to qualitative detail, elected leaders who will champion the public interest and require that all parts of their city be designed with care.

In this issue of *Places* we report on one stream of initiatives that is designed to help mayors make good places of their cities — to bring out the best in the physical and community resources they steward. The Mayors’ Institute on City Design, initiated ten years ago, brings together small groups of mayors who meet for several days with a comparable number of urban designers. Each mayor brings a case study for discussion, critique and suggestion, and each of the designers gives a presentation.

The Mayors’ Institute was implemented with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and later expanded by the NEA to include a series of regional institutes so that smaller cities could be served. Altogether, the program has had far-reaching impact. It has involved 259 cities throughout the country, nearly 200 urban design and development professionals, and ten schools of architecture and planning. Often, the mayors’ case studies are subsequently studied in greater depth by faculty and students at schools affiliated with the institute. The story of this collaborative achievement is sampled in the following pages through articles, interviews with mayors and case study reports written by people who have participated in the program.

Reading through these stories brings forth images of the thousands of towns and cities with which our country is made — an array of places, each of which needs caring attention, all of which can benefit from educational programs like these that alert a city’s leadership to the opportunities and risks at hand.

We are indebted to Samina Quraeshi, director of the National Endowment for the Arts Design Program, and Christine L. Saum, executive director of the Mayors’ Institute, for their support of this project. We also wish to acknowledge Alex Krieger, director of the Mayors’ Institute, and present and past regional Mayors’ Institute directors — Matthew Bell, Richard Dagenhart, John Hoal, William Morrish, Grover Mouton, Siddhartha Sen and Mark Schuster — for their advice and assistance in preparing this report.

— *Donlyn Lyndon*