

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

To Rally Discussion -- Heeding the Call to City Design

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/97c6d6bh>

### Journal

Places, 19(1)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

Toderian, Brent

### Publication Date

2007-04-15

Peer reviewed

# Heeding the Call to City Design

Brent Toderian



It would be a shame if Allan Jacobs's call to arms for North American planning departments, and city planning schools, in the Summer 2006 issue of *Places* ("The State of City Planning Today and its Relationship to City Planning Education," Vol. 18, No. 2), went unnoticed across planning and design circles. Having worked both as a municipal planning leader and private consultant across Canada, I found his comments remarkably candid, controversial, and absolutely correct. This article could represent a key punctuation point in a discussion (and debate) on the future of how we plan and build cities, and educate our future city-builders on either side of the border.

I, for one, am trying to ensure the article is noticed here in Canada.

First, I've put it on the agenda to discuss at our annual "Big Cities Planning Directors Meeting." Second, we're making it a key piece in the national dialogue among Canada's leading urbanists in the city planning, architecture, and landscape architecture professions. This dialogue has recently led to the creation of the new Council for Canadian Urbanism, or *CanU*. Formed by prominent design-emphasizing practitioners from across the country—and in particular, influential municipal design voices from planning departments of all scales—*CanU* has been working to address many of the challenges Jacobs describes. Perhaps it's the rare candor of Jacobs's piece that makes it so useful to this discussion.

It's true that here in Canada, we

think of ourselves as having a strong tradition of municipal city planning relative to the United States (based largely on stronger planning tools at our disposal, and a tradition from our constitution of "peace, order and good government," as opposed to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," with its connection to individual property rights). As a result, we have many good planning departments, with many passionate and talented professionals.

Here in Vancouver we've had a particularly strong tradition, over several generations of planning directors, of a strong public voice in shaping a "city by design." As a result, the planning department has enjoyed a very high profile and has received a share of the credit (along with our many city-building partners)

for Vancouver's consistent recognition as one of the world's most livable cities. At present we're in the process of defining our next era of city-building, with an "eco-density" initiative that sets ecological sustainability as our primary definition of success, and which strives to make exceptionally designed higher densities with green technologies the new "business as usual" throughout the city (see [www.vancouver.ca/ecodensity](http://www.vancouver.ca/ecodensity)).

Embracing Jacobs' spirit of candor, though, I found his description of some planning departments to be disturbingly familiar. Despite the tools, many Canadian planning departments are too quiet, allowing their voice in the politics of city-making to be muted. Others seem to emphasize the number of applications they process rapidly, within a spirit of "customer service," as their key definition of success—regardless of the resulting urban quality. And as Jacobs points out, far too many have moved from a being departments of physically adept city-shapers, to the keepers of policy, demographics and rules. Urban design is often either not present at all, or perhaps only as a small piece of the department. (When there is only a single individual called an urban designer on staff, it suggests the discipline should be considered a specialty alongside the heritage planner or the social planner, instead of a key dimension of well-rounded "typical" employees).

His observations are equally true in Canadian planning schools, most of which have moved away from the physical (although thankfully some are trying to move back). But this critic should not stop with planning schools. In my observation, typical architecture and landscape architecture programs also tend to emphasize individual building design or the power of the plant type. In the process, bigger

opportunities are missed to teach holistic urban design and city-making. And yet all three design professions, in their worst moments, easily seem to fall into a "turf war" over which profession is best positioned to be (and train) the city-builders of the future.

### A Renewed Emphasis in Canada

The growth over the past few years of urban design programs in Canada is both exciting and unnerving, as it may suggest to planning schools that they are off the hook. This would be an unfortunate assumption, as a key to achieving many of the city planning priorities of the future lies in a solid grounding in the physical patterns we plan, design, negotiate or approve.

Among other things, the *CanU* leadership (drawn from the three design disciplines) is working to promote a return to a greater civic design awareness at all scales. This is not seen as an end, but as a means of better achieving the important goals of urban sustainability, healthy and complete communities, civic beautification, social and economic integration, and so on. Rather than fighting over turf, we're coming together as partner-disciplines, as urbanists, with a common goal of better urban environments and a stronger and clearer urban agenda. We're still in the baby-step stages, but we have some of the highest-profile voices in the country among our ranks, and we're gaining momentum.

As a city planner, though, like Jacobs, my own call to arms is for my discipline. The city planner of now and the future has to be a design-savvy urbanist, a generalist who never stops learning; a renaissance person for cities, who understands how the physical relates to the social, the ecological, the economic, the cultural, the marketing/ "branding," the story-

telling, and so on, and who can bring it all together in a physical sense; a practitioner able to channel his or her inner artist as well as inner scientist, to apply both rational and intuitive thinking, and know when these are most important; a creative, open-minded lover of the complexity of cities.

Are any planning schools producing this kind of practitioner? Some educators I know suggest it's overly ambitious to try, as their students should learn all that "on the job." I disagree. It needs to be the spirit of how and what they learn right from the start. Maybe it's overly ambitious, but I'd be happy if schools were trying.

The discussion that Jacobs's article spurs is long overdue. The lack of constructive candor on these issues may be one of the reasons we find ourselves where we are. Although I do think things are starting to move in the right directions in Canada, in order for planning departments and planning schools on either side of the border to maintain, or regain, their relevancy, city planners and urbanists from all disciplines must become clearer and more persuasive voices in shaping our cities, able and willing to work with, but also challenge, the obstacles of short-term politics, the profit imperative, and NIMBY.

I have tremendous faith in the three design professions. We can be the leaders our cities need now more than ever.

**Opposite:** Vancouver's new era of "eco-density" will build on past downtown densification to encourage well-designed new residential developments at various densities citywide. Yet continued success depends on teaching a new generation of planners the importance of city design. Images of downtown seawall and Arbutus neighborhood courtesy of Vancouver Planning Department.