

THE PHOENIX REPUBLIC

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MY TURN

'Authenti-City' creates urban fabric organically

"Dull, inert cities, it's true, do contain

the seeds of their own destruction and little else.

But vital cities have marvelous innate abilities for

understanding, communicating, contriving and inventing

what is required to combat their difficulties.

Lively, diverse, intense cities contain

the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over

for problems and needs outside themselves."

Jane Jacobs, "Death and Life of Great American Cities," 1961.

Too often, urban development is guided by the bottom line rather than the best interests of the larger community. When form follows finance, however, it often fails to offer a meaningful and authentic experience. We seek authenticity in a place just as we'd rather slip between all cotton rather than polyester-blend sheets at night. And, as current sheet trends sug-



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gest, the higher the thread count the better. Just as higher thread count improves the comfort and quality of our sheets, so higher urban thread count — the more intense, the more "stuff" — improves the comfort and quality of our cities.

In the Phoenix metropolitan area, there is something of a consensus now around this mantra. "We want a fine-grained urban fabric," chant the politicians, developers, neighborhood groups, artists and urban designers alike. But how can we avoid the polyester-blend environments and achieve this highly sought-after authentic urbanism?

I refer to it as "authenti-City," a combination of large-scale and small-scale initiatives from the top down as well as the bottom up:

■ We need to support local independent businesses through a range of incentives from grants and tax waivers to storefront improvement opportunities, micro-loans, development services assistance and more.

■ Simultaneously, we should provide opportunities for urban dwellers to benefit from regional, national and global enterprises. Even "big box" stores can have a place in the downtown as long as they are designed to enhance rather than detract from the vitality of the city. As we are seeing in other cities, regulatory practices are requiring these stores to line the street with windows and doors rather than set back from the street with large parking lots in front and no windows.

To achieve authenticity, how development occurs goes hand in hand with what happens. Process is as important as product. The "authenti-City" responds to community needs and tastes. It reflects its local climate, topography, history and cultures. A wide cross-section of the entire community is involved in shaping the city.

Planning is the first step in building pride of place. It's a process that builds community while building consensus.

Even more important is ongoing maintenance and reinvestment. We have all seen neighborhoods that started out identically but have met

vastly differing fates because one was the lucky beneficiary of TLC while the other suffered neglect and disinvestment. What makes the difference between the well-maintained and the neglected neighborhood is the pride that people take in a place.

Like a good parent, a good plan nurtures healthy growth and change without being "over-involved," without determining everything, allowing the city to blossom and define itself. The frameworks should not prescribe every land use and every architectural detail.

Like all healthy organisms, an authenti-City is always growing and evolving according to new needs. People will always hatch a new idea for improving the city: A network of linear parks, a public market, better crime prevention, more educational opportunities, the conversion of right of ways into lively streetscapes, or the development of small-business incubators.

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