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Integral Urbanism in Desert Cities: Recapturing Links in Metro Phoenix

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25.1 Introduction

A house where I once lived in Cincinnati came with a small grape ivy plant in the hall bathroom. I adopted the plant and watered it regularly. But oddly, it never grew. It did not die, but during the 2 years I lived in the house, it never sprouted a leaf. While residing in Phoenix, Arizona, I have been reminded often of that grape ivy. Leaving it behind for the next inhabitants, it became emblematic for me of so many North American cities that, although may be surviving, are clearly not thriving.

Just as we are a part of nature, so are our habitats, including our cities. Many of our expressions implicitly acknowledge this organic quality of places. For instance, we typically describe a dull place as “lacking character” in contrast to a “lively” place. The French describe the dull place as lacking soul (*Il n’a pas d’âme*) and the lively one as “*animé*” (animated, spirited, or soulful). Over the last half century, however, urban development has treated the city as a machine for efficiently sheltering and protecting, as well as moving people, money, and goods. However, these well-intentioned efforts to cleanse the city of illness and to render it more efficient have gone too far. Globalization and attendant standardization has been endangering the soul and character of our landscapes and our selves, as manifest in sprawl, the growing perception of fear, a declining sense of community, and environmental degradation.

While this downward spiral continues, it has been countered in recent years by a marked upward spiral. Indeed, a quiet revolution has been underway in urban design and planning, born of a frustration with reactive and escapist trends, aiming to heal the wounds inflicted upon the landscape over the last century. This revolution is quiet because its practitioners are not united under a single banner and because its sensitivity to people and the environment translates into interventions which may not call attention

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to themselves. Nonetheless, numerous stones have been thrown around the globe over the last decade, and their small-but-growing ripples are beginning to dramatically reshape our physical environment while enhancing life quality.

25.2 Integral Urbanism

I have described this body of proactive urban design and planning as “integral urbanism.”¹ Integral urbanism seeks to readdress dispersal and fragmentation by recovering earlier city-building wisdom while also accommodating contemporary technologies and lifestyles. Rather than free-standing single-use buildings connected by freeways along with rampant (sub)urban sprawl which separates, isolates, alienates, and retreats, integral urbanism emphasizes connection, communication, and celebration.

Integral urbanism is characterized by five qualities: *hybridity*, *connectivity*, *porosity*, *authenticity*, and *vulnerability*. While modern urbanism espoused the separation of functions, integral urbanism reaffirms their symbiotic nature by bringing activities and people together at all scales. These various integrations can be accomplished through cross-programming buildings and regional plans—spatially (plan and section) as well as temporally. Examples of cross-programming include the office building with basketball court and daycare center, the community center and library, the intergenerational community building (combining day care, teenage community center, adult education, and seniors center), the public school/community center, the integrated parking structure (into office, residential, and office buildings), the movie theatre/restaurant, and the urban plaza by day/movie theatre at night. When successful, the efficiencies allowed by these integrations conserve energy and other resources while decreasing social isolation, thereby empowering people to envision alternatives and implement change most responsively and creatively (Figure 25.1).

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In contrast to the modern attempt to eliminate boundaries and the postmodern tendency to ignore or alternatively fortify them, integral urbanism seeks to generate porous membranes. These membranes might also be described as thresholds, or places of intensity. By allowing for diversity (of people and activities) to flourish, this approach seeks to reintegrate (or integrate anew) without obliterating differences, in fact, preserving and celebrating them. As such, it might be regarded as a form of “urban acupuncture” that clears blockages and liberates *chi*, or the life force, supporting urban and economic revitalization. Applied to existing built environments as well as new development, these interventions may have a tentacular or domino effect by catalyzing other transformations (Figure 25.2).

In sum, integral urbanism emphasizes networks, relationships, connections, interdependence, communities, translucency or transparency, permeability, flux, flow, mobility, catalysts, frameworks, and process rather than boundaries, independent objects, individuals, walls, permanence, final products, master plans, and utopia. Practicing integral urbanism entails: (1) integrating parts of the city that fragmented over the last century: live, work, create, and recreate; (2) identifying what is integral to a place, its DNA, and building upon these assets, rather than focusing on deficits and problems; and (3) engaging in urban acupuncture by removing blockages along “urban meridians,” just as acupuncture eliminates blockages along the energy meridians of a body. This practice emphasizes the basic theories of landscape ecology, with a larger focus on patterns of

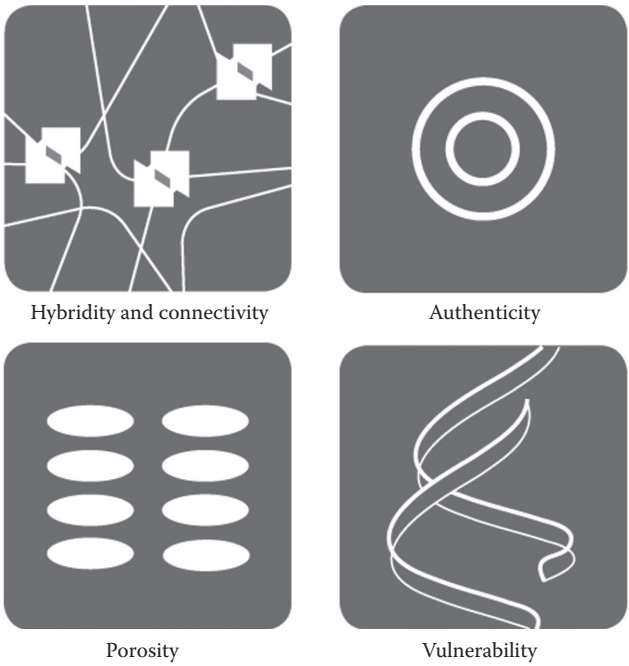


FIGURE 25.1
Integral urbanism qualities.



FIGURE 25.2
Vitality in Phoenix.

corridors and patches of a region, and their critical linkages in the underlying matrix of a system, such as an urban environment.²

Political and economic trends supporting the practice of integral urbanism include widespread opposition to urban sprawl, interest in conserving the environment and preserving historic urban fabrics, the rise of regional governments, the renaissance of central

cities, the exponential growth of neighborhood associations and community gardens, the establishment of community land trusts, and transformations wrought by the new economy (e-commerce, partnering, and technological convergences). Social trends reflect and reinforce the political and economic ones, expressing a frustration with the fragmented landscapes produced by conventional urban development and a craving for the excitement, spontaneity, and sense of flow characteristic of truly urban places.

25.3 Learning from Our Past Mistakes

In Western society, generally, we have been witnessing a gradual reorientation toward valuing slowness, simplicity, sincerity, spirituality, and sustainability in an attempt to restore the connections that have been severed over the last century between body and soul, people and nature, and among people. If the 1960s witnessed the “We generation” calling for peace and love; the 1970s the “Me generation” with a focus on self-awareness and self-actualization; the 1980s the “Whee generation” characterized by materialism and escapism; the 1990s the “Whoa generation,” placing a self-imposed brake upon the rapid changes that were wreaking havoc upon our landscapes and our well-being; then perhaps the new millennium has been spawning a re-generation, with a clear-eyed vision and the courage to rebuild our towns and cities, revitalize our communities, restore what has been taken from the earth, and realign design with the goal of supporting humanity.

For architects and planners, this has been apparent in the shift away from using the machine as a model for buildings and cities to seeking models simultaneously in ecology and new information technologies (e.g., thresholds, ecotones, tentacles, rhizomes, webs, networks, the World Wide Web, the Internet). In contrast to earlier models that bespoke aspirations for control and perfection, these current models suggest the importance of connectedness and dynamism as well as the principle of complementarity. Rather than seeking the norm, average, or center, there is clearly a fascination among urban designers with what happens along the border, the edge, and the in-between. There is interest, for instance, in the ecological threshold where two ecosystems meet, where competition and conflict coexist with synergy and excitement, if it is thriving. At the same time, the attitude among urban designers toward rapid change has been shifting. From attempting to deny or control change, an attitude characterizing most of the twentieth century, we are now witnessing an acceptance or even embracing of change.

The earnest but ultimately misguided modernist dictum that form follows function was largely supplanted by the deeply cynical late twentieth-century tendency for form to follow fiction, finesse, finance, and foremost fear.³ In the promising approaches we are currently seeing, form is once again following function, but function is redefined. Rather than primarily mechanistic and instrumental, function is understood more holistically to include emotional, symbolic, and spiritual functions. From “less is more” (modernism) to “more is more” (postmodernism), the byword has become “more from less.” Some implications of these trends for urban design include greater emphasis on mass transit along with transit-oriented developments, quality public spaces, urban infill, and mixed-use development.

One byproduct of the early twentieth-century quest for efficiency was zoning. Introduced one century ago, when the car was first mass-produced and -consumed, zoning segregated functions that had been integrated from time immemorial. People are mutually interdependent, however, so are our activities as expressed in city form. And cities only thrive

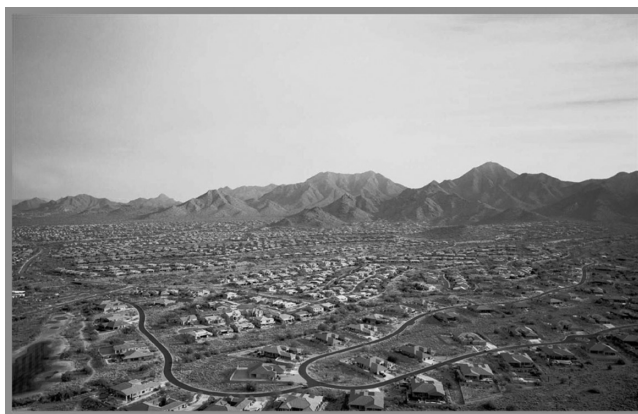


FIGURE 25.3
Sprawl in Phoenix.

(are only sustainable) when these interdependencies are allowed to flourish. We are now belatedly recognizing the problems wrought by zoning and the need for reintegrating our now fragmented urban areas.

Sprawl depletes our natural resources. As a number of recent studies demonstrate, sprawl takes an enormous toll on our physical and mental health contributing to automobile fatalities, obesity, asthma, workplace woes (and decreased productivity), and suburban sorrows (boredom and isolation). Research also highlights the importance of urban vitality for economic vitality since corporate headquarters and young talented people choose to locate in the most vibrant cities (Figure 25.3).⁴

25.4 Retrofitting Metro Phoenix: A Case Study of Integral Urbanism

Phoenix, Arizona epitomizes urban sprawl. Currently the sixth largest city in the United States, Phoenix is growing the fastest of the 15 largest cities and expected to be the third largest city by 2020. The urban form of the Phoenix metropolitan area rarely betrays its desert setting because virtually 90% of it was constructed since the World War II, a period when local topography, climate, culture, and history played little role in shaping cities. This period additionally privileged moving cars over moving people, making the Phoenix metropolitan area larger than the Los Angeles metropolitan area as well as seven states, including Massachusetts. As sprawl replaced natural desert and agricultural lands with highways, suburban tract housing, and shopping malls, the nascent central cities of this polycentric metropolis were largely abandoned.

Phoenix is paying for its youth, then, by lacking the built-in strategies of older and wiser desert cities that protect pedestrians from the blazing sun such as compact urban cores with a range of passive cooling devices. Instead, the settlement pattern virtually prohibits walking while contributing to social isolation and environmental degradation. The highly publicized “heat-island effect,” the result of substituting asphalt for biotic landscapes, intensifies the magnitude of this problem, as well as the need for remedying it.

The pendulum of city-building logic has been swinging back over the last decade to privilege human comfort and well-being along with the creation of pedestrian-friendly environments. But Phoenix inherits an urban legacy of misdirected decades prior. How can this urban region retrofit itself to offer a truly urban experience? How can this desert city protect and honor its distinctive landscape? How can this sprawling city become pedestrian-friendly *as well as* auto-friendly? How can this young city be authentic, true to its roots, have a sense of place, or a “there” there? And how can it gracefully accommodate people of different ethnicities, races, social classes, age groups, and abilities?

These questions are both logistical and existential. The ways they are resolved will determine whether and how Phoenix rises again. Phoenix will not accomplish these goals by continuing to build tract housing, freestanding office towers, and shopping malls surrounded by seas of asphalt parking. That is certain. But nor should it attempt to start over *tabula rasa* or emulate pre-automobile nineteenth-century cities.

A certain density is necessary to achieve an urban experience, but Phoenix need not emulate the high-density model of cities such as New York or Chicago. Although building and population density will need to intensify in certain pockets throughout the Phoenix metropolitan region, most important is enhancing “programmatic density,” or the juxtaposition of diverse activities. Rather than separate living from working from recreating and so forth, the predominant pattern presently, these activities should occur in close proximity, albeit not necessarily in the same fashion they coexisted in the pre-automobile era. The outcome would be new hybrids that pool human and natural resources to the benefit of all, conserving energy, time, money, water, fuel, building materials, paper, and more. Such an integration of activities would reduce commuting, enhance convenience, preserve the natural environment, and greatly increase the amount of quality public space along with the opportunities for social interaction, spontaneous as well as planned.

Without reverting to a preindustrial model or continuing along the same bleak path, Phoenix could truly become a “Metroasis,” where swaths of pristine Sonoran desert wind through low-lying neighborhoods surrounding a network of urban cores and corridors comprised of shops, restaurants, cafes, workplaces, cultural institutions, and urban housing. Many of these vital hubs of activity would appear where canals meet major streets, leveraging the region’s 181 miles of canals, a “canalscape” initially constructed by early inhabitants of the region 2 millennia ago and rebuilt during modern times (Figures 25.4 and 25.5).

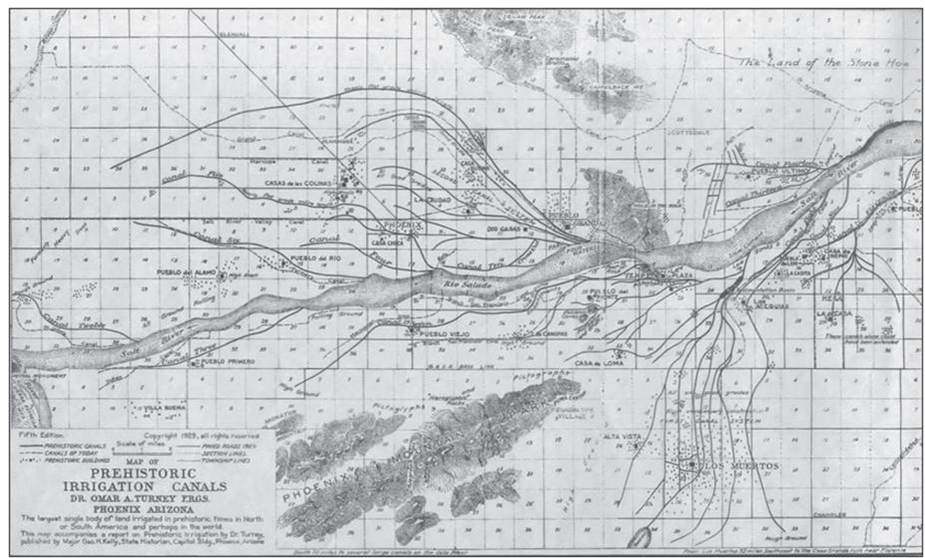
A canalscape initiative has been working toward the creation of Metroasis through:

Private investment: Creating vital hubs of urban activity where canals meet major streets.

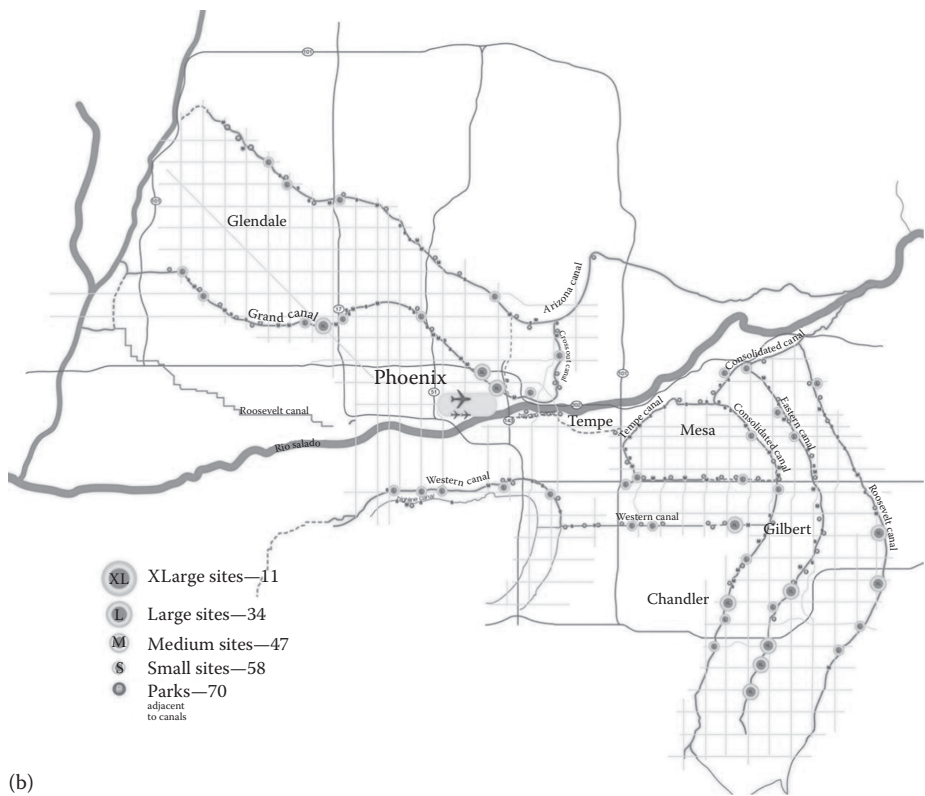
Public investment: Enhancing the commons area alongside the canals to encourage alternative non-motorized transportation and to provide alternative energy sources (wind, hydro, solar, geothermal).⁵

The idea of canalscape in Phoenix supports enhancement of green infrastructure and greenways, a growing trend in many urban areas, and ultimately reinforces linkages, natural and created, in larger urban matrix.

By introducing mixed-use urban infill along recreational and commuting corridors, canalscape would furnish a distinctive quality of life that is both urban and in nature. Canalscape offers an alternative to sprawl, quality places to gather, beautiful and comfortable recreational opportunities, alternative transportation routes throughout the region (walking or biking instead of driving), and homegrown non-polluting energy for local use. Distributed



(a)



(b)

FIGURE 25.4
(a) Prehistoric canal system map. (b) Potential sites for canalscape.



(a)



(b)



(c)

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Canalscape—A sustainable and authentic urbanism. (a) Existing canalscape site. (b) Proposed canalscape design.

along the urban energy meridians of the Phoenix region, canalscape would perform urban acupuncture, bringing health and well-being to the city and its inhabitants.

While the canals offer distinctive settings for vital urban hubs, these are also emerging at street intersections and along certain arterials, particularly along the new light-rail corridor. Throughout the metropolitan area, creative entrepreneurs with keen intuitions about what is right for here and now—not architects or planners—have been making indelible marks on the urban and cultural landscapes of the Phoenix area.

In a disinvested area of downtown Phoenix, for instance, former investment banker David Lacy purchased a two-storey building with the goal of opening a bakery on the ground floor and living above. Willo Bread opened its doors in 1999 and was embraced by the community for which it became a hearth writ large. After numerous requests from customers for a place to linger, Lacy purchased the space next door and opened an urbane café/restaurant My Florist in July 2001 which immediately became extremely popular both as a neighborhood restaurant and a popular gathering spot for the downtown business crowd at lunch and the opera, symphony, and theatre crowd in the evenings. Its landmark neon sign, dating from 1947 when it was indeed a floral shop, has been described as “a tower of flower power.”⁶ In need of more parking and wishing to improve the view across the street, Lacy leased a former Dolly Madison Bakery Building and arranged for an art gallery to locate there. He subsequently purchased adjacent properties to open a market, pastry shop, and more.

Soon after the opening of Willo Bread, photographer/developer Wayne Rainey purchased a 12,000 ft² warehouse and converted it into a diverse and thriving creative community, including two large shooting areas, an art gallery, a graphic design firm, a film/video company, an architectural firm, offices of an arts and culture magazine, and more. All share a conference room with a concrete tabletop salvaged from the bathroom floor, dressing rooms and makeup areas, high-speed Internet connections and workstations, and a full kitchen. Rainey selected the name monOrchid for this cooperative to suggest “many petals to make one flower.” In deciding exactly which petals may join this collective enterprise, Rainey explains, “Latent potential is the descriptor we most look for in a project.” Reflecting on the day-to-day workings of the monOrchid community, Rainey remarks, “It makes for an interesting life. There are creative projects conceived every day and the energy levels sustained are nothing less than phenomenal.” He adds, “It is not Utopia, but certainly we are on to something that will become more common in the near future. We look at things from so many perspectives. Having gone through the process of growing such a business changed the way we look at our work too.” In addition to monOrchid, Rainey also owns the nearby Holga’s, a two-storey apartment building that he sandblasted and converted into live/work spaces for artists as well as a gallery. The Chinese characters prominently displayed on the building façade symbolize love, interdependence, and balance (Figure 25.6).

In a mid-twentieth-century suburban district northeast of downtown Phoenix, a bustling hub of activity has been sprouting over the last 6 years, thanks largely to the dedication, diligence, and vision of Craig and Chris De Marco. Straddling a small parking lot are the wine bar/restaurant Postino’s, located in an old post office, and the market/bakery/café/pizzeria/flower shop La Grande Orange, both extremely popular among neighbors as well as people who travel long distances to enjoy the quality and character of these enterprises. La Grande Orange is designed by Chris de Marco along with architect Cathy Hayes (whose office is a few doors down) with custom display cases by Hayes as well as fixtures salvaged from a 1940s Los Angeles high school gymnasium. The bathrooms are outfitted with Philippe Starck appliances. Each entrepreneur owns her/his own business. “The whole thing,” Craig explains, is “synergistic”; it “is based on creating a certain energy.” De Marco describes this corner of Phoenix as a “constantly moving and breathing space” with the recently added restaurant Radio Milano, an anticipated taco stand along its east side, and more.

Numerous other creative entrepreneurs have been sprinkling the Phoenix region with pockets of soul and character providing unique combinations of coffee shops, restaurants, bookstores, bike stores, yoga studios, art supply stores, wine bars, boutiques, and more.



FIGURE 25.6
Phoenix art scene.

25.5 Slash City

I have described the attitude as well as outcomes embraced by canalscape as well as these creative entrepreneurs as *Slash City (/city)* because of the hybrid functions (this-slash-that) and the emphasis on the slash itself, on what happens where these functions meet.¹ The city celebrates the boundary, edge, or threshold as the place where people, things, and ideas converge. It does this by not only retaining the integrity of each activity and group of people (e.g., bakery, restaurant, residence, gallery), but also allowing for easy movement between them through the creation of porous “membranes:” separators that are physically, visually, and/or symbolically permeable. This is an urbanism that refuses to stay within the lines, that seeps through (seeping of views, people, and activities, inside and outside).

Conventional big box stores, schools closed off from their surrounding communities, and gated communities are not porous. The */city* is. This approach and the landscape it generates reflect the complementary human urges to merge (connect) and to separate (for distinction, individuation), with the ongoing tension and dynamism these generate. In the process, we are also integrating—or slashing—the professions that divided and subdivided: architecture/planning/landscape architecture/engineering/interior design/industrial design/graphic design/fashion design/sculpture/painting/performance art/etc. We are perhaps “slashing” (in the sense of deconstructing) some existing structures of thinking, acting, and building for the sake of reconstructing. This reconstruction features permeable boundaries (the slash itself) that become thresholds of diversity: biodiversity, social and cultural diversity, artistic diversity, and commercial diversity.

The pop culture trend to *slash* television programs bears some interesting parallels with slash urbanism. Published in “slash zines” and on numerous websites, *slash* is a subgenre of *fanfic* which involves rewriting television programs through recontextualization (filling in the gaps between episodes), expanding a series timeline to past or future, refocusing (shifting attention from main characters to secondary ones), moral realignment (for instance,

transforming villains into protagonists), genre shifting (for instance, converting a drama into a comedy), crossing over (combining programs), character dislocation (moving characters to another time and/or place), personalization (injecting oneself), emotional intensification, and eroticization. Applied to urbanism, we “slash” the city when we become actively involved with it, when we challenge convention by recombining elements in new ways, and when we activate places that have laid dormant, or manifest intensities in places where they have only been latent.

Neither idealizing the past nor escaping the present, the incipient canalscape and already impactful contributions of numerous creative entrepreneurs are generating a distinctive desert urbanism. They are making slits in the urban fabric, slashing Phoenix, in a fashion described by Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson as “incremental metropolitanism,” thereby placing a brake on the economic, cultural, and environmental devastation of sprawl. To the extent this upward spiral succeeds in countering the downward one, this could be a region whose majestic landscape joins an ancient civilization with contemporary urban sophistication to produce an unparalleled quality of life.⁷

25.6 The Beauty of the Child

Prometheus was bound to a rock for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to people. Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden for eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. And the Babylonians were forced to speak mutually unintelligible languages and scattered across the earth for attempting to build a tower to heaven and achieve notoriety. As allegories about our desire for knowledge, power, and control, these cautionary tales advocate against hubris and for humility. And they admonish against excessive rationality, invoking instead wonder, awe, mystery, and sanctity. They serve as reminders to acknowledge and celebrate our human qualities in contrast to the dual temptation to become god-like or machine-like, a temptation particularly endemic to architects and planners.

Listening to the minute differences noticed by my then 6 year old daughter Theodora (now 16) between her Star War Legos and the characters from the movie, I remarked that she remembered many more details from the movie than I did. Theodora responded, “Children who found the beauty of being a child when they were a child remember these things. I guess you didn’t find the beauty of being a child when you were a child. Or you lost it.” Struck by the painful recognition of my innocence lost, I asked, “Is there any way I could get it back?” She thought for a moment and replied, “If you lose the beauty of the child, it’s very hard to get it back. You get it by playing a lot. Maybe if you have lots of fun as a grown-up, you can get it back.” After a moment, she added, “And once you’ve got your child back, there’s nothing that can stop you from doing anything” (Figure 25.7).

Just as the “beauty of the child” can get buried beneath the responsibilities of adulthood, so the vitality of a city—its soul and character—can disappear if squeezed into a rational and overly-prescribed master plan. Rather than throw any discipline or planning to the wind, perhaps we might rethink how and when to apply them. Keeping a place’s “child” alive, or bringing it back to life, would not mean zero intervention but instead a gentle guidance that is responsive, flexible, playful, and nurturing, permitting self-realization.



FIGURE 25.7
(a) Downtown Phoenix 2002. (b) Downtown Phoenix 2007.

Practicing integral urbanism in Phoenix and other cities may offer the soul food necessary for revitalization, allowing them and us to blossom and truly thrive. Not merely survive.

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AUTHOR QUERIES

- [AQ1] Please check the chapter title for correctness.
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