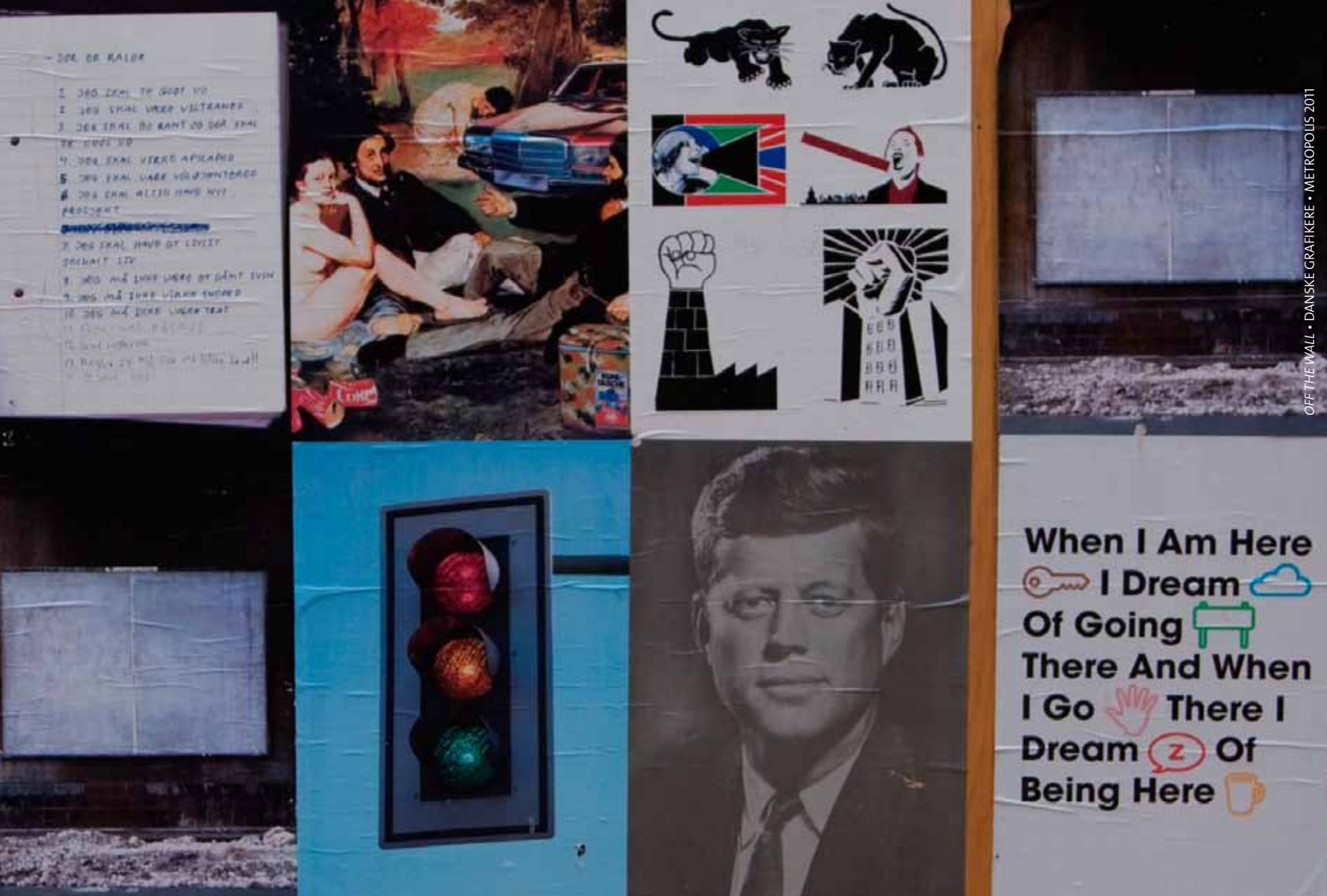




THE CITY IN FLOW: INTEGRAL URBANISM FOR A NEW ERA

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“What the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them.”

US President Barack Obama, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009

Indeed, “the ground has shifted.” President Obama’s remark during his inaugural address not only applies metaphorically, but literally as well. For we have been witnessing of late a marked, and long overdue, positive shift in urban growth and development I describe as Integral Urbanism¹.

Over the last decade or so, a quiet revolution has been taking place aiming to heal the wounds inflicted upon the landscape by the modern and postmodern eras. These wounds are manifest in sprawl, the growing perception of fear, a declining sense of community, and environmental degradation.

In an effort to remedy what ails us, communities around the world have been engaging in a range of restorative efforts by incorporating five qualities: *hybridity*, *connectivity*, *porosity*, *authenticity*, and *vulnerability*. *Hybridity* and *connectivity* bring activities and people together at all scales (from local to global). *Porosity* preserves the integrity of that which is brought together, while allowing mutual access through permeable membranes, rather than the modernist attempt to dismantle boundaries or postmodernist fortification.

Authenticity involves actively engaging and drawing inspiration from actual social and physical conditions with an ethic of care, respect, and honesty. Like all healthy organisms, the “authentic-City” is always growing and evolving according to new needs that arise, thanks to a self-adjusting feedback loop that measures and monitors success and failure. And *vulnerability*

calls upon us to relinquish control, listen deeply, value process as well as product, and re-integrate space with time.

With the mass production and consumption of cars a century ago, city plans became motivated, particularly in the US, primarily by getting from point A to point B as quickly as possible, rather than valuing the journey. Pedestrian and vehicular paths thus separated. So did land uses, activities, buildings, and districts resulting in cityscapes composed of freestanding high-rise buildings and suburban tract houses linked by highways. Largely absent were quality public spaces, local character, multi-functional places, and an integration of the built and natural landscapes. Dispersal and fragmentation occurred hand in hand, spelling an end to the connectedness, walkability, and sense of place of the pre-vehicular landscape.

An integral urbanism aims to bring these back. While modern urbanism espoused the separation of functions in urban form, integral urbanism reaffirms their symbiotic nature by combining and linking them. These various integrations can be accomplished through cross-programming buildings and regional plans—spatially (plan and section) as well as temporally allowing people and activities to co-mingle and converge in new ways. Emergent examples of cross-programming include the office building with basketball court and daycare center, 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 buildings and retail centers), the movie theatre/restaurant, and the urban plaza by day/movie theatre at night.

Transposing this concept onto the larger scale can increase density of activity without necessarily increasing building density, translating into reduced commuting, greater convenience, preservation of the natural environment, an increase in quality public space, and greater social interaction. The outcome is new hybrid typologies and morphologies that pool human and natural

resources to the benefit of all. Resources conserved include time, effort, talent, money, water, energy (fuel, electricity, and human energy), building materials, paper, space, and more.

The result is *a city in flow*. As defined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, flow is the intense experience situated between boredom and overstimulation. It is characterized by immersion, awareness, and a sense of harmony, meaning, and purpose². While generally intended for enhancing individual performance such as playing sports, it is useful to consider how places might be “in flow.”

We know intuitively when a place is in flow. It strikes a balance between boredom and overstimulation through, for instance, combining monuments with background buildings, de-familiarizing features with banal ones, and a wide range of people and activities. It is not the unrelenting grid, but nor is it deconstructivism on the urban scale. Places in flow also allow ease of movement of people, goods, and information. Too much ease of movement would produce boredom and stasis, eliminating mystery and wonder, ultimately the Achilles heel of the modern city. Places that are truly in flow thus have interesting and unexpected detours and zig zags. We might consider these ebbs, or the rocks around which the flowing stream navigates. And since people require varying amounts of stimulation to be in flow, places that are in flow offer choice and may be experienced in different ways.

The well-intentioned, and in many respects laudable modern efforts to cleanse the city of illness and to render it more efficient have gone too far, ultimately “draining the life” from them or “cutting off their lifeblood.” Simultaneously, globalization and attendant standardization have been endangering the soul and character of our landscapes and our selves. We crave unique and authentic experience along with more opportunities for freedom of expression. Just as people are mutually interdependent, so are our activities as expressed in city forms. Cities only thrive (are only sustainable) when these interdependencies are allowed to flourish.

Integral urbanism simply validates our intuitive understanding of how places should be – dirt, disorder, and unpredictability included rather than propose some ultimately undesirable as well as unattainable utopia. Places of urban integrity exemplify certain qualities. Places in search of the vitality these qualities endow might learn from them.

Integral urbanism veers away from master planning which, in its focus on controlling everything, ironically tends to generate fragmented cities without soul or character. Instead, Integral urbanism proposes more punctual interventions that have a tentacular or domino effect, catalyzing other interventions in an ongoing dynamic process. This approach activates places by creating thresholds, or places of intensity, where diversity thrives. These interventions activate “dead” or neutral spaces; they acknowledge and care for abandoned and neglected spaces. By increasing density of activity and perhaps building mass, they weave connections between places, people, and experiences. These transformations can respond to current needs and desires while also allowing for new ones that may arise.

An integral urbanism allows greater self-determination and empowerment because it brings people together with more time and energy to develop visions and implement them. By enabling efficiencies and synergies, it allows greater conservation and less waste, more quality time, and less distrust, paranoia, and fear. The health of communities and relationships relies upon trust and too often, an “architecture of fear”³ fills the void left by an erosion of trust. Alternatively, integral urbanism fills that void in a way that builds trust by providing mutually supportive networks of people and buildings that are diverse (hybrid) by design, dynamic, and self-adjusting.

In other words, convergences in space and time (of people, activities, businesses, and so forth) generate new hybrids. These hybrids, in turn, allow for new convergences and the process continues. This is, in fact, the definition of development⁴. While the modern paradigm discouraged convergences through its emphasis on separation and control, this new paradigm

encourages them. Indeed, the diversity of actors involved in producing this big picture demonstrates the principle of ecodiversity along a threshold of time.

PRACTICING INTEGRAL URBANISM

Integral urbanism involves an approach as well as an outcome. Just as a good manager builds on existing strengths of an organization, so good urbanism builds upon given assets of a place. Integral urbanism begins by engaging communities to identify these “gifts” and consider ways to leverage them. In this way, it sets a generative and dynamic self-adjusting feedback mechanism into motion, where communities build creatively upon their strengths, sometimes in the process even converting their greatest problems into their greatest solutions.

Rather than get mired in critiques, this approach focuses on identifying the strengths of a place. It similarly recognizes exemplary practices from which we can learn and upon which we can build. In contrast to the modern ethos that started with a clean slate, integral urbanism begins by identifying what we already value and assuring its preservation, be it buildings, neighborhoods, businesses, cultural institutions, natural landscapes, or creative and intellectual capital. Recognizing existing assets and capacities inflects the process, invariably leading to a consideration of what we might value more with minor adjustments. After protecting what is valued and enhancing what may be underperforming, this approach addresses what is missing and should be added.

Rather than neglect, abandon, or erase our urban heritage, integral urbanism *preserves* buildings, neighborhoods, and natural landscapes that we value, *rehabilitates*, *reclaims*, *restores*, or *renovates* what is underperforming, and *adds* what we do not have yet but would like, as informed by effective community involvement. Consequently, the new builds upon existing assets and is deeply influenced by this “DNA” of a place, allowing for unique and meaningful expressions to unfold. Skillfully inserted, these interventions into the urban fabric can perform

“urban acupuncture,” clearing blockages and liberating energy to catalyze additional positive growth and change. And the dynamic process of city- and community-building continues.

This approach reaches across the divides of professions and academic disciplines: architecture, planning, landscape architecture, engineering, interior design, industrial design, graphic design, sculpture, painting, performance, and more. Reflecting a general reorientation in the Western world, integral urbanists seek to restore the connections that have been severed over the last century between body and soul, people and nature, and amongst people. While not forming a “school” of thought, since the expressions vary widely, this considerable undercurrent shares an emphasis on drawing from the best aspects of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern urban design; incorporating new technologies in a humane way; and respecting physical, historical, social, and environmental contexts. This approach emphasizes re-integration (functional, social, disciplinary and professional), porous membranes or permeable boundaries (rather than the modernist attempt to dismantle them or postmodernist fortification), and design with movement in mind, both movement through space (circulation) and through time (access to the past as well as dynamism and flexibility).

In Metropolitan Phoenix, we are practicing integral urbanism canalscape, an initiative to create vital urban hubs where an ancient canal system developed by Native Americans six centuries ago meets the modern urban grid. This distributed network of “canal villages” would reflect the region’s unique quality of interspersing urban living into a breathtaking desert landscape. The mixed-use urban infill would provide an alternative to sprawl, highly desirable live/work settings, and much-needed places to gather. In addition, canalscaping would stimulate the currently sluggish economy, contributing significantly to urban and economic revitalization. Building upon our assets, this re-orientation of urban growth and development along the canal banks offers an authentic and sustainable desert urbanism for the Phoenix region.

A NEW ERA ON THE HORIZON

Just as defragmenting our computers allows them to run more effectively, defragmenting – or integrating – our cities and communities is enhancing individual as well as community health and well-being. Bringing together the functions that the twentieth-century city separated, integral urbanism celebrates connection and communication in contrast to the functionally-zoned city which separates, isolates, alienates, retreats, and escapes. It achieves this by integrating buildings with nature, center with periphery, local character with global forces, the various professions involved with urban growth and development, the university and the community, and people of different ethnicities, incomes, ages, abilities, and lifestyles.

From the machine as model (modernism), to cities of the past as model (postmodernism), integral urbanism finds models simultaneously in ecology and new information technologies such as thresholds, ecotones, tentacles, rhizomes, webs, networks, the world wide web, & the internet. From ecology, it adopts the logic that the health and well-being of places derives from optimizing numerous variables rather than trying to maximize one variable⁶. And from new information technologies, it learns about the distributed, dynamic, and resilient qualities of networks.

In contrast to earlier models, these suggest the importance of connectedness and dynamism as well as the principle of complementarity. Integral urbanism and the landscape it generates reflect the complementary human urges to merge (connect) and to separate (preserve distinction), with the resultant ongoing tension and dynamism. On the ecological threshold where two ecosystems meet, for instance, there is competition and conflict along with synergy and harmony. There is fear along with adventure and excitement. It is not about good or bad, safety or danger, pleasure or pain, winners or losers. All of these occur on the threshold if it is thriving.

In sum, integral urbanism emphasizes:

- Networks rather than boundaries
- Relationships and connections rather than isolated objects
- Interdependence rather than independence or dependence
- Natural and social communities rather than just individuals
- Transparency or translucency rather than opacity
- Permeability rather than walls
- Flux or flow rather than stasis
- Connections with nature and relinquishing control, rather than controlling nature
- Catalysts, armatures, frameworks, punctuation marks, rather than final products, master plans, or utopias
- Integration rather than perfection

The urban and environmental challenges of the last century have prompted a reconsideration of values, goals, and means of achieving them, particularly over the last decade. In contrast to the fast-paced more-is-more mentality, the appeals of simplicity, slowness, spirituality, sincerity, and sustainability are clearly on the rise. Side by side with the still prevalent reactive tendencies of form to follow fiction, finesse, finance, and fear⁷, myriad proactive initiatives from a wide range of contributors to shaping the environment are shifting the paradigm toward integration.

Although there remain obstacles along this path, we are nonetheless passing through a rare historic moment when healthy urban growth and development is aligning with political, economic, and social trends. These 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, the avid interest in urban agriculture and community gardens, the establishment of community land trusts, mixed-use development, and transformations wrought by the new economy (e-commerce, partnering, and technological convergences). Social trends reflect and coincide with these, 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. In the best case scenarios, the efficiencies allowed by this urban development conserves energy (including human) and other resources while decreasing social isolation, thereby empowering people to envision alternatives and implement change most responsively and creatively.

While integral urbanism pertains specifically to urban design, its five qualities might effectively apply to governance, homeland security, management, business, education, mediation, technology, the arts, and other realms. Applied generally, these qualities translate into regarding organizations as dynamic networks with built-in feedback mechanisms; acknowledging the primacy of relationships and process over products; bringing people and other resources together to achieve efficiencies (optimization); and maintaining an ethic of care and respect for self, others, and the environment. Incorporating these qualities brings a profound shift from competition to synergism, the kind of collaboration that yields outcomes larger than the sum of its parts, not the lowest common denominator.

We have been coming full circle or, more accurately, full spiral, by learning from the inherent wisdom of nature and cities of the past, and infusing these with contemporary sensibilities. Rather than choosing to continue or abandon the modern project, our hyper-rational reliance upon information technologies along with a simultaneous revalorization of process, relationships, and complementarity is conspiring to eradicate the either/or proposition. We are doing both simultaneously, each providing feedback for and adjusting the other accordingly, holding potential for achieving integration at another level.

The modern era divided the world and our thinking about it into fragments and our landscape followed. We are suffering the results. Without shifting into reverse, integral urbanism seeks to put a brake on the continual fragmentation of our landscapes and lives through proactive design and policy solutions. Resolutely refusing to idealize the past or to escape

the present, integral urbanism seeks to mend seams in the urban and social fabrics by acknowledging contemporary challenges and realizing informed and inspired alternatives for an enriched future.

Crises and stress incite growth and change in all life forms. The kind of change that occurs may support or detract from the health and well-being of the system depending upon its level of resilience and intelligence. Integral urbanism is *shifting the ground* for a new era, by offering the soul food necessary for our cities and communities to blossom and truly thrive. Not merely survive.

NOTES

INTEGRATE: To form, coordinate, or blend into a functioning or unified whole; to unite with something else; to end the segregation of and bring into equal membership in society or an organization; desegregate; to become integrated
INTEGRAL: Essential to completeness, lacking nothing essential, formed as a unit with another part
INTEGRITY: Adherence to artistic or moral values; incorruptibility; soundness; the quality or state of being complete and undivided; completeness

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