



URBAN DESIGN FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

text Nan Ellin

Towards the end of the last millenium, we had reached a stalemate regarding how to design our cities. This was apparent in the imitation of older cityscapes [i.e. Mill Avenue] as well as in the massive importation of styles from other places [i.e. Mercado]. While both of these trends may have their merits and appropriate uses, the nostalgia of the former and inauthenticity of the latter suggest a denial of the here-and-now as well as an exhaustion of creative energies. This "drag-and-drop" theory of urban design is ultimately escapist and provides little in the way of sustenance for ailing cities and communities.

In response, urban designers around the globe have been bucking these reactive strategies and engaging in proactive design practices. These practices seek inspiration from nature and from information systems instead of from the machine (early-20c. model) or from cities of the past or other places (late-20c. model). They emphasize mending seams in the urban and social fabrics through **connection, communication, and celebration** in contrast to the functionally-zoned city which separates, isolates, alienates, retreats, and escapes. For community building, this shift has been apparent in the emphasis on **diversity, density, dynamism, and democracy** in contrast to the segregated and inequitable city. On the social value barometer, we are witnessing a gradual reorientation towards **slowness, simplicity, sincerity, spirituality, and sustainability** away from acceleration, complexity, irony, and blatant disregard for the environment. All of these shifts reflect an attempt to restore the connections that have been severed over the last century between body and soul, people and nature and amongst people.

The Phoenix metropolitan area manifests numerous examples of these proactive design practices, most of which seek to link disparate parts of the region. These include numerous efforts to enhance our canals and trails systems, such as the Salt River restoration project (19th Avenue to 32nd Street) that is converting this river bottom into a 550-acre wetland recreation area and the Papago-Salado trail connecting Tempe, Phoenix, and Scottsdale, a national design competition awarded in 2002 to the team led by architects Dan Hoffman and Christoher Alt (see shade, September 2002).

Other initiatives link the city through transit systems such as the Valley Metro Light Rail or through public art as exemplified by the Phoenix Arts Commission's work along highways, city streets and canals. Others still link the region from an administrative standpoint such as the Maricopa Association of Governments and the Maricopa Regional Arts and Culture Task

Force. All of these initiatives open pathways—literal as well as metaphorical—thereby providing urban connections for residents of the Phoenix metropolitan area.

Another way to enhance connections is by improving nodes, or places where pathways meet. Local examples include the Beyond the Banks Plan for urban infill along the Salt River restoration project (above) and the proposed Transit-Oriented Development (TODs) of Phoenix and Pedestrian-Oriented Districts (PODs) of Tempe that seek to densify certain areas along the light rail with select uses and building types. The creation of nodes is also apparent in two other proposals: the Downtown Phoenix Public Market Project initiated by Cindy Gentry and Emma Sirois and the Downtown Phoenix Conservancy initiated by Cyd West to bring pockets of nature into the city while also reducing the heat island effect. We have also been witnessing the emergence of significant nodes of creative entrepreneurship scattered throughout the metropolitan area. These are just a few of the many signs of life in this southwest metropolis.

The failure to address urban problems holistically has indeed taken its toll in US cities as manifest in sprawl, a declining sense of community, and environmental degradation. But we are currently fortunate participants in a historic shift from the anxious 20th century urban design responses to rapid change—guided largely by denial—to the more recent acceptance and even embracing of change. This shift is manifest in a range of exceptional architecture and planning practices from small-scale interventions to plans affecting cities and regions such as the local examples mentioned above. These proactive design solutions restore health and vitality to our cities so they truly thrive economically, socially, and environmentally.

The implementation of these urban design solutions relies upon effective partnerships between the public and private sectors and on the integration of architecture, urban planning, landscape architecture, and public policy. Resolutely refusing to idealize the past or escape from the present, we must work together to generate informed and inspired alternatives for an enriched future. [s]

*Illustration: Proposal for Central Market at the Sante Fe Depot
by students at the ASU Integral Studio, Spring 2003, under the direction of Professor Scott Murff.*