



Urban *Instinct* sustainable phoenix

by Nan Ellin

Although the importance of quality places to our “quality of life” is generally accepted, the investment required to improve the places we live has often seemed economically unjustified. The New Economy, however, has been shifting this equation such that “quality of place” counts more than ever before as an indicator of economic vitality. Improving our economic well-being has grown mutually reliant upon improving our urban and environmental quality.

The returns on investment in quality places are handsome, reaping much more than economic vitality. Quality places also conserve dwindling environmental resources and improve physical and mental health. A 2002 study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports: “There is increasing evidence that the way we [currently] design our communities discourages physical activity such as walking and cycling, contributes to air pollution, and promotes pedestrian injuries and fatalities. Automobile dependence contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, and increases the risk of car crashes. Runoff due to the absence of vegetation is polluting our water systems. And sprawl may threaten mental health and social capital.”

What precisely should we be aiming to accomplish in our efforts to enhance the vitality and well-being of our cities? What are the indicators of “quality of place”? According to a recent report issued by ASU’s Morrison Institute of Public Policy, quality of place derives from six criteria: access to an outstanding natural environment, distinctive urban amenities, choice, smart people and innovation, hipness and tolerance as well as an

entrepreneurial culture, and speed (the ability to move from place to place easily and to get things done efficiently). To that list, we might add the availability of water and energy sources, the purity of water and air, thriving arts and culture, affordable cost of living, safety and security, and a range of quality housing and education options.

All of these things might be subsumed under the umbrella category of *sustainable urban design*. Proactive urban design solutions can restore health and vitality to our cities so that they truly thrive. These solutions rely upon partnerships between the public and private sectors and on the integration of architecture, urban planning, landscape architecture, public policy, the social sciences, and the biological sciences. Whereas the division of labor occasioned by industrial production approximately one century ago allowed for tremendous progress in terms of generating and applying new knowledge, it has also enabled urban fragmentation, social isolation, environmental degradation, and the decline of central cities. Quality urban design addresses these problems by promoting the four pillars of sustainable communities: Environment, Equity, Economics, and Aesthetics.

Sustainability in its full sense — environmental, equitable, economic, and aesthetic — is becoming the consensual goal. Environmentally, urban design interventions should reduce detrimental impacts on our natural resources (including people), ideally contributing to greater environmental health and resilience. Just as ecological habitats thrive on biodiversity and suffer when habitat fragmentation occurs, human communities



similarly thrive on social diversity—which relies upon social equity—and suffer from urban fragmentation. Financially, sustainable urban design respects resource availability (money, time, materials, labor) and considers long-term maintenance and other costs. Ideally, it brings a return on initial capital investments in financial terms as well as in measures that may not be quantifiable but have significant economic impacts. These include reducing the rates of asthma, obesity, depression, automobile accidents, and other public health indicators as well as improving morale and productivity at the workplace and children's performance and well-being at school. Finally, sustainable urban design must be pleasing—or at the very least inoffensive—to the eyes of its users, or they will not continue using and/or enjoying it. If a place is regarded as outstanding in the aesthetic category, it can succeed in bringing delight to people on an ongoing basis as well as wide renown, thereby strengthening the economic pillar of sustainability as well. This might be described as the “Bilbao effect,” referring to the multiplier effects the Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Gehry has had on the Spanish city of Bilbao.

Like the vast majority of the American landscape, the Phoenix metropolitan area boasts excellent isolated examples of architecture, but is lacking in quality urban design. In other words, design excellence in the Phoenix region, as in much of the United States, has yet to extend to the large scale, to the spaces

between buildings, and to the processes that inform urban growth. As a result, our urban landscape can be dull, unfriendly to the pedestrian, and a contributor to contaminating our air and water, taxing our physical and mental health, and elevating ambient temperatures.

A study commissioned by the City of Phoenix in 1966 (for \$10,000) by the American Society of Planning Officials reported: “Phoenix during the era of its most rapid growth has developed atomistically, without goals, without plans. The city will continue to develop this way unless there is a shift in philosophy by the city government, the city planning commission, the planning department and, most important of all, by the citizens of Phoenix. There must be a conscious desire on the part of everyone to help Phoenix realize its potential to become a great city. Otherwise, it will continue sprawling and spreading across the desert, formless and without distinction.”

Unfortunately, we did not sufficiently heed this prescient warning issued almost four decades ago. Where will Phoenix be four decades hence, in 2044, when the population is projected to be three or four times what it is today? It is clear that our current practices are not sustainable.

Just as parents “re-direct” children these days instead of punishing them, we might redirect growth and development in Phoenix. To do this effectively, we need to envision and implement initiatives, like the ones described here, that mend seams in our urban and social fabrics. With our feet planted firmly in the present, we can honor our past and forge consummately livable pathways into the future.