

parking lot location and landscaping, signs, screening of loading and trash areas and building height. The most popular principles of good design (with at least 80 percent of towns agreeing) are directed at simple “neatening up”: screening service areas and parking lots, reducing the variety of signs, and re-creation and infill of contextual patterns. Ironically, the least popular or irrelevant, according to the planners who responded, were design principles that were more specifically related to building or urban design, for example, encouraging public spaces or fountains. Other than those popular principles directed at the desire to protect a site’s natural environment (a finding that slightly conflicts with the same planners’ admission that they do not actually review a project’s response to microclimate, sunlight and shadows, the generation of pollution, or energy efficiency), most design principles being used extensively are extremely general and transferable from one place to another.

*Design review encourages mimicry and the dilution of the authenticity of place.* By simplifying the rules and guidelines, by encouraging banal imitations, by denying originality, creativity, or expression of difference in any way, the design review system eventually creates a dead place, a place without surprises or exigencies of site or landmarks. Fortunately, the city’s uncontrollable actors (age, events, change) take care of such superficiality by immediately beginning the process of writing over it. And fortunately, too, design review is usually not that effective and is almost never followed up after a few years. But what of places that are effectively controlled for long periods of time? Some cities that have had stringent design review for long periods of time, like Cincinnati’s Mariemont (a village designed in 1921 by John Nolen), are completely distinct from their chaotic neighbors, with a serenity that comes only from common architectural expression and homogeneity. It could be argued that the excellent quality of Nolen’s original plan for Mariemont, the coherent and consistent design of the original buildings, and the respect that this excellence inspired affected later developments a great deal more than design controls. Nevertheless, Mariemont has resisted any changes through the offices of its design review. It is as if it is frozen in time. The price of its homogeneity is fossilization, an inability to change. In a tiny town like Mariemont, the price is undoubtedly worth it. But in a large, functioning, active city, such rigidity could be functionally, morally, and socially dangerous.

Outside of special historic enclaves like Charleston, South Carolina, Mariemont, or Boston’s Beacon Hill,

places where extreme control is exerted have a kinship to theme park perfection or urban fantasy and embody an idea that life lived here is not real life fraught with pain and crisis and emotion, but an artificial one, cleaned up, predictable, and safe. Thus the overcontrolled Battery Park City is the Disneyland equivalent of the real New York City—it is New York rendered as a stage set, spooky and unreal because it lacks the scars of urbanity: street people, vendors, handmade signs, noise, and bustle (Russell, 1992). Sadly, this approach also dilutes the meaning of the real space it imitates or preserves under glass. The camouflage of new “old” buildings resulting from misguided design review makes the authentic old buildings disappear and lose their importance and distinction.

*Design review is the poor cousin of urban design.* Ideally, design review’s purpose would be to serve an urban design vision specifically developed for the place, the processes, and the public will. Of particular focus and importance for urban design implementation would be the public investment: streets, sidewalks, plazas, public buildings, maintenance, parks. The use of design review for this purpose is relatively rare. Of the cities with design review, less than 30 percent subject public buildings to design review and only 18 percent review public infrastructure for design.

Design review generally focuses on single projects rather than working from an urban design program. Sometimes, design review is performed in a vacuum, operating as a studio jury, with judgments and critiques rendered on the design merits of a single project, without a concern for its place in the urban ensemble or its impacts on the nature of the surrounding space. (Of those with design review, 26 percent did not use contextualism in any way as a measure of design quality.) More often, design review is concerned with surroundings, specifically *context*, which has become confused in meaning. At the current time, planners who use context as a measure agree strongly that contextual fit means that 1) new buildings and rehabs should respect the existing pattern of buildings and open space and 2) designs that diverge widely from surroundings should not be allowed. This, too, though, is not an urban design vision or plan, but simply the recognition of an old, existing pattern that in itself constitutes too simplistic a view of urban design. Planners without physical training may find this a comforting and completely adequate approach to urban design but it negates the importance of design to create