

real thing, reproduced in miniature or exaggerated versions.

The use of a postmodern urban design language has been the trademark of development in contemporary American downtowns. In what follows we will present the major themes that capture the tragedy of postmodern urbanism, and we will analyze their impact on the urban form of American downtowns.

From synoptic vision to a collage downtown

“Make no little plans,” urged Daniel Burnham, setting the pace for modernist town planning and downtown design. The modernist ideal of the “machine city” envisioned an urban environment broken down into functional segments that constituted the parts of a coherent whole. Downtown was one constituent part, and planners tried to homogenize it, unify it, plan for its totality. Grand plans and designs and large-scale urban models were the dominant tools of modernist planning and architecture.

Postmodernism advocated a very different approach to downtown design. The coherent canvas of modernism was now broken down into incoherent fragments. A collage of unrelated settings and spaces started appearing in downtown environments as a result of an urban design praxis that was commissioned by private entities. Because of its private nature, urban design became disjointed, episodic, incrementalist, and fragmented. When megablocks in downtown got developed, they composed self-sufficient environments instead of being pieces in a unifying master plan, as modernism had dictated. The postmodernist settings were not linked to the city; they excluded it instead. Horton Plaza in San Diego, Rincon Center in San Francisco, California Plaza in Los Angeles, and all the other cases that we have discussed in this book aspire to form miniature cities within their city. As will be recalled, the developers of the Metropolis project in Los Angeles promoted their project as a city within a city. The episodic nature of their development, combined with the public sector’s lack of overall vision for downtown, prevents these increments of change from becoming integrated into the city’s urban tissue. They remain incoherent fragments, and together they compose a collage of downtown spaces. This market-driven urbanism places more emphasis on aesthetic appearance and promotes the idea of space as a set piece designed to complement only the building, but not necessarily the rest

of the city. This urban design is oblivious of its immediate context and the overall urbanism. Attention is given to the architectural style and form, the colors and texture (remember the forty-nine shades used in Horton Plaza), the seating and landscaping of specific buildings, but not to urbanistic objectives such as coherence, continuity, transitions, and pedestrian connections.

The difference between modernist and postmodernist urban design ideologies is well illustrated when we compare urban design documents of different eras. *Design for Development* (Community Redevelopment Agency 1968), produced by the Los Angeles CRA in the mid 1960s, provided the overall framework for the redevelopment of Bunker Hill in Los Angeles. The *Los Angeles Downtown Strategic Plan* (Community Redevelopment Agency 1993) is the recent product of an advisory committee appointed by the CRA and composed of downtown businesspeople; developers; housing and social service providers; residents; cultural institutions; and consultants for urban design, historic preservation, economic planning, and transportation. The document discusses the future of downtown Los Angeles and recommends programs and projects.

The first document aspires to be a grand unifying plan. It strives to plan and determine the form and uses of all twenty-nine blocks of the Bunker Hill landscape. Its authors note that

It is important to realize as essential to the overall concept, that the land uses, circulation system, and urban forms proposed throughout are immeasurably interdependent. The Design for Development is predicated on the total cumulative effect of complementary uses, integrated circulation patterns, and the structuring and interplay of urban forms. (Community Redevelopment Agency 1968, 1)

The rhetoric of the text attests to the urban designers’ wish for unification, integration, and comprehensiveness. The major concepts of urban form, as described in the document, are:

A carefully conceived interaction of building volumes and open spaces.

A strategic arrangement of building forms.

A project-wide organization which differentiates one zone of activity from another while expressing their necessary interdependence within the whole of the project and related Downtown area.