

political questions as: Who benefits and who loses from such design? Whose priorities and needs are followed? Whose history is represented? and What is the sociophysical context that should be respected?

The contextless downtown

Ironically, postmodernism has followed modernism in producing an acontextual downtown. Like postmodern architecture, postmodern urban design also tends to be context independent. Postmodernism criticizes the universality and standardization espoused by modernism and advocates instead the introduction of an eclectic combination of architectonic elements—sometimes whole settings from the past—as historic signifiers. The Spanish Steps of Rome find their way to the heart of downtown Los Angeles, and London’s Burlington Arcade is recreated in a major commercial street of Pasadena, California. But these efforts are not attentive to the current realities and particularities or to the local history and culture of their context. As a result, they do not carry any particular meaning. Quite often, there is a recreation of an idealized past or present, a nostalgic selection of the safe and likable attributes, and an attempt to erase all the troubling elements. Spaces are created simply to impress their users. This attempt of postmodern urban design to reestablish historical meanings often results in deriding and trivializing those meanings (Lash 1990). The principal concern about this postmodern urban design is not one of style, which dominates architectural criticisms, but rather one of its missing connections, linkages, and continuity in space and time.

It is possible to explain postmodern urban form essentially as a true landscape of a market economy, where each project attempts to outperform its immediate competition in scale, scope, and novelty of themes, driven by imperatives of profit maximization and market success. Product differentiation is critical in a competitive environment. Autonomy from the context is the driving force behind such an urban design. Yet the architecture and imagery of contemporary downtown projects, urban malls, plazas, galleries, and the like is characteristically similar in most American downtowns. This paradox can be explained by the fact that the goals of commercial or corporate developers are similar everywhere, and these are the goals that are expressed and served through design. Moreover, the superstar architects employed to create signature buildings in downtowns around the globe produce the same standardized form independent of the local context. This results in

a franchise culture: an urban form created by multinational corporations, which incorporates popular and well-known elements and is reproduced at downtown centers in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, London, Paris, or Tokyo (Zukin 1991).

Production of form and practice of design

Finally, we must consider the practice of design, which has been one of our major themes. We have examined on several aspects of downtown design—from public art to the production and packaging of individual projects. We have seen how in the absence of overall vision and direction, the public component of downtown urban design has become ad hoc and opportunistic. Because of their weakened fiscal position, cities have little leverage in influencing the location, timing, or direction of development. They don’t have the resources to initiate the priming action that was common in earlier days. The public component of urban design has been essentially reduced to managerial and brokerage functions and, where feasible, to exaction of public benefits. Cities have essentially taken a reactive rather than a proactive stance. And because of this reactive position, the public sector has become more defensive and protective than it was in the past. Much greater emphasis is now placed on procedures, design and environmental impact reviews, and other such entitlement processes. It is as if urban design in the public sector has amounted to a “minimax” strategy—that is, one that minimizes “maximum” losses—for protecting the public good and interest. As we have seen from our cases in San Francisco, developers and property owners have considered such managerial oversight as authoritarian and meddlesome and, sometimes, counterproductive in terms of overall design outcome.

Even where the public sector has demanded public benefits from downtown developers and corporate clients, such as plazas and public art, these benefits have been presented mainly as ameliorative measures or reduced to bureaucratic formulas. Take public art for example. Public art has become an integral element of public urban design. Many downtowns have accumulated an impressive collection of art pieces—albeit located mainly within the privately owned plazas and courts—but their public purpose and their effect on the appearance of the city remain undefined and undetermined. At best they serve as window dressing that compensates for bad design or an ugly streetscape.