

“REFLECTIONS ON URBAN DESIGN”

OPPI Urban Design Working Group - edited by Rick Merrill and Alex Taranu

It is a special privilege for the OPPI Urban Design Working Group to contribute to the 100th anniversary edition of the Ontario Planning Journal, particularly since the inception of the group was due to the Journal’s call in 1999 for editors of its Urban Design section.

An anniversary issue is always an opportunity to look back as well as ahead. Seven years ago, the 50th issue of the Journal featured on the cover what was at that time the plan for the Cornell Community in Markham. Now Cornell is 25% built and a success story, proving the essential contribution of urban design to the new pattern of suburban communities. But there is much more to Urban Design than that, and our group worked very hard to educate planners, the public at large about the importance of good design in planning our cities, towns, and villages.



For this special edition, we would like to engage the entire planning community by putting forward this question from Rick Merrill, the newest member of our Coordination Group:

“Given the role of urban design in guiding the interaction between design and planning professionals, how has urban design changed over the past ten years, what are the new challenges for the profession and what tools/approaches do we need to address to get us to the next level? Just as important, what are the implications for planning?”

We would like to launch this question to all urban designers and planners and we hope to follow up in the next editions of the Journal. Some of the members of the Group had the opportunity to discuss the question resulting in the following comments:

"I think that Planning profession finally understands that to have successful and visually attractive urban environments, it is not enough to have only excellent planning processes in place, including land use policy work - there are so many other complementary elements to be considered. It is very encouraging that the planning profession is increasingly being interested in notions such as "sense of place", "sense of community" or "place-making".... The biggest challenge is... to create a better synergy between planning, architecture and landscape architecture, engineering, which urban design precisely promotes."

"There is one very true notion of urban planners as being "metasystem planners".... On the other side, urban designers are "system planners" who see design as the artful management of relationships within integrated systems: cultural, visual, architectural, artistic, natural, technological, etc. The key is that both are concerned about "relationships" and should work toward the same goal – a better urban environment."

Sinisa (Sonny) Tomich, Senior Urban Designer, City of Hamilton

"One of the major challenges to our profession is the on going process of the Urbanization of Suburbia. In the context of the increased focus towards Smart Growth and Sustainable development this is becoming a hot issue that requires new approaches in planning and urban design. As older suburbs come to age, as new suburbs become full fledged cities, urban designers have to develop new approaches that will mix traditional urban forms with the conventional development as practiced in the last 50 years.

Intensification and infill, developing along arterials, transit oriented development require a strong reliance on good urban form and full integration of urban design in the planning process as well as new tools for guidance towards better design, public participation and visualization."

Alex Taranu, Senior Planner Urban Design, Town of Markham

"One of the most interesting changes in the role of urban design is the impact on suburban communities. We all assume that the major impetus for strong design direction is in the urban areas. However, a number of suburban communities in the GTA have surpassed the City in the strong emphasis that they have given to built form as an important aspect of planning development.

The implications for planning relate to the changing nature of how communities are being designed. An open process that aims at the efficient use of resources (Smart growth) and is truly dedicated to

producing livable communities that result in meaningful places requires the close interaction between a diverse group of professionals. Urban designers provide an integral part of the process and will continue to find relevance in generating strong ties between written policies and their impact on built from.”

Rick Merrill, Partner, The Planning Partnership

I think our profession needs to build on some of the recent success, in some of our communities, in getting urban design on the political agenda, and seek to further demonstrate the “**value**” of good design. The residents and their elected representatives should be able to see and understand for themselves why some communities age so much better than others, why real estate values increase in areas where care has been taken in responsible and comprehensive design of a place and, the exorbitant cost of trying to retrofit troubling issues of traffic, failing commercial areas, housing diversity, transit support and access to a full range of parkland and natural environment options. It is only when this “**value**” both qualitatively and quantitatively, is understood that political decisions can be made to better support smart urban design decisions and place making.

Dan Leeming, Partner, The Planning Partnership

Over the last ten years an encouraging trend has begun to emerge. Concepts of “nesting” and strong family values have created smaller houses, emphasizing quality over quantity. Value didn’t stop at the front door. Developers and builders enhanced the streetscape, the appearance and general livability of communities. Ambitious community visions, such as Cornell, Oak Park, Angus Glen and Bayview-Wellington emerged in the early 1990’s, which were not only comprehensively designed, but also inclusive and integrated. These communities range across the greater Toronto area, and involved different consulting teams, some having been initiated by the public sector, while others were developer-led. All share a common element: the vision for these communities was created by an “Urban Designer.”

Steven Wimmer, Partner, MBTW Group

We look forward to hearing from you – please direct your answers or comments to the OPPI Urban Design Working Group, attention to Rick Merrill, 416 975 1556, ext. 31, e-mail rmerrill@planpart.ca

This article was published in the Ontario Planning Journal, September/ October 2002, Vol 17, Number 3