



## Understanding Civic Design

The American Heritage dictionary defines *civic* as “pertaining to or belonging to a city, to a citizen, or to citizenship.” It defines *design* as “to conceive, invent, contrive, or to form a plan for.” Civic design is approaching how we use, plan, physically design, and support our communities and the public realm in a way that benefits citizens, citizenship, and the city. It means putting people first. It is an attitude, a process, a way of operating, a mindset.

It might at first seem obvious that this is what we all do in community work and in place making. But, of course, there are competing priorities that can either become the end without us realizing it, or supersede the importance of people. For instance:

- ◆ There is the bottom line, always a driving force. It can't be ignored, yet too often it becomes the most important element in decision making. When it does it can yield people unfriendly places and decisions. It can be an excuse not to be creative. It is a way to defeat initiatives that one does not agree with. It regularly generates bad decisions that ultimately cost more in the long run.
- ◆ There are personal agendas. Self interest comes in many guises. In a culture that prizes individual choice and rights, it is sometimes difficult to speak for or even sympathize with the public good, which civic design certainly is.
- ◆ There are rules and regulations that, while likely based in reasonable intent, often are at odds with civic design. For instance zoning can and does separate uses that ought to be together for a more vibrant public realm.
- ◆ We become confused about priorities. For example: Moving the car every where in the community as fast as possible at the expense of the person on foot. We have been doing this for seventy years, continue to do so, are still confused in thinking this is more important than people, and not understanding the priority of moving people not cars.

Civic design asks what is best for our citizens and their citizenship? What will encourage people to spend time in the public realm enjoying themselves, interacting as a community, building ties to each other and the community? What is best for the collective good? In the options we have, what most favors citizens, citizenship, the well being of the community, a sense of place and belonging and community? What will result in a vibrant, alive, joyful, rich public realm?

Civic design has several overlapping, integrated components. They include:

- ◆ The physical design of places which encourages and makes possible the presence of people in comfort and in an interactive way.
- ◆ Paying careful attention to uses that will work together to give people reasons – both practical and fun – to be in a place.
- ◆ Providing varying forms of entertainment or diversion to make a place enjoyable.
- ◆ Understanding the elements native to the local culture which make people not only feel comfortable, but welcome and at home in a place.
- ◆ Providing the perhaps unseen but necessary supportive infrastructure to make places safe, clean, fun and useful.
- ◆ A laser focused public policy and leadership that places primacy on people friendly places.

Civic design is about embracing a holistic approach to the work of place making and community building. The greatest challenge to employing it as an overarching guide is absence of perspective about big-picture intent. As communities and their place makers get bogged down in day-to-day decision making, it is easy to lose sight of the whole. This is natural and it is human.

Therefore, civic design necessitates awareness and a willingness to periodically step back and assess where you are. The rewards are an alive public realm, an engaged and loyal citizenry, full, rich lives, and a competitive advantage as a place to live.

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