REVIEW

OCTOBER DIARY: IN SEARCH OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

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I attended three important city design meetings that took place in rapid succession last October — Urban Design, Reshaping our Cities; Portland’s Fourth Annual Regional Growth Conference and the first Congress for the New Urbanism.

Reflecting on my kaledioscopic exposure to case studies, projects, papers, speeches and panel discussions, I have concluded that it is now possible to discern a larger pattern in this collective outpouring, one that suggests that an important prise de conscience has occurred.

We face the awesome powers of change, dissolution, the loss of the social contract, the erosion of place, the explosion of big box retail on the strip, the proliferation of gap-toothed and depressed urban streets and gated enclaves at the end of the latest highway; we are challenged by the expanding virtual space of the video screen and the make-believe hyperspace of theme park attractions.

Nonetheless, there is a surprising mood of resolve, determination and will to keep faith with the city and to make it work. There is a growing group of seasoned urban ideologues who are struggling valiantly to define, forge and bring into being viable models of urbanity, old or new. They are exhibiting a pragmatism that defies easy ideological classification; they are obsessed about the preservation of authentic existing urban places and the possibilities of creating new ones; they are eager to form new alliances and to make use of new tools.

Reining Regional Growth in Portland

In Portland, for example, 800 people came out in shifts to a one-day event to hear from a combination of experts, politicians, officials and activists about options for accommodating future growth. Should Portland, they asked, grow up or grow out and embrace continued sprawl?

The planners and elected officials of the new Metro government eloquently and persuasively pressed the audience members to face fundamental contradictions in their own value systems. What are the implications, for example, of calling for preservation of natural areas, on the one hand, and no limitations on personal mobility, on the other?

Most interestingly, the audience expressed a strong skepticism about relying in the future on smart cars and...
highways to forestall more fundamen-
tal choices about urban form. One
might expect people to embrace tech-
nological fixes that will keep the status
quo going. Although some light rail
lines also fall into the category of tech-
nological fixes, Portland’s MAX system
has the potential to be different
because there is a strong interest in
planning for denser development
around stations. Unlike smart high-
ways and rail systems being built else-
where, MAX might inspire significant
changes in the urban fabric.

Testing the New Urbanism
The Congress for the New Urbanism
was a gathering with a point of view
and a mission. Every aspect, from the
careful selection of speakers and partic-
ipants, to format of assembly, reviews
of projects and papers, to the choice of
venues (Alexandria’s Arthanaucum and
Lyceum), was designed to reinforce the
central message of the movement to
refuse American urbanism.

Numerous versions and forms of
pedestrian and transit-oriented com-
nunities were compared and began to
be critically evaluated. Serious ques-
tions were raised about the impact of
these, especially where they occur on
greenfields sites, rather than in cities
or suburbs. A quite justified concern
was that without vigilance, this move-
ment could be co-opted by marketers
as simply justifying another style of
retreat and withdrawal, bypassing the
essential goals of diversity, openness
and connectivity.

Many serious questions arose for
which there are as of yet no satisfying
answers. For example, none of the
recent attempts to forge new hybrids
of main street and shopping center are
totally convincing, but historical anal-
ysis presented of the evolution of these
types was rich and provocative. The
audience itself became the subject of
discussion. The almost complete
absence of non-white faces was a glar-
ing omission, which must be addressed
in upcoming congresses.

Nevertheless, the Congress was an
extremely ambitious start that holds
great promise for the next congress, to
be held in Los Angeles this spring, and
the two others that are expected.

Postscript
After immersion in these relatively
friendly waters, one is left with a sense
that we urbanists may have won (at
least the battle for) the hearts and
minds of many in the design and plan-
ing professions, the schools and the
media — and a small group of pro-
gressive developers whose presence in
Alexandria was most heartening. And
there can be no doubt that the body
of concepts and ideas expressed at
these gatherings is gaining evidence
in such circles.

Yet this victory is still an illusory one.
We still have to come to terms
with the limited ability of this rudder
to turn the ship — the fundamental
inertia and irreversibility of the status
quo, whose explicit and implicit
assumptions imbue every statute, zon-
ing ordinance, building code, engi-
neering standard, lending decision and
marketing strategy across this conti-
nent. The tenets of this status quo
may lack the fervor of any conviction
attached to ideas, but they are still
spreading like a virus and rarely challenged
across the globe.

At the same time, decades of strenu-
ous pronouncements and institutionaliza-
tion have ensured that the suburban dream
of dispersal, mobility and conspicuous
consumption of space has and in fact
maintained a powerful pull on the collec-
tive North American psyche. This
dream remains the barometer of per-
sonal and familial success, as the basis
for the major monetary investment of
one’s life and the preferred vehicle for
escaping involvement with society’s ill.
A Herculean effort is still required to
gain control of the vast and partially
unplowed machinery of control and
regulation on the one hand, and to
influence the complex nexus of individ-
ual and collective choices about living
patterns on the other.

In the end, it’s North Americans are
to be truly offered at least the option
of more sustainable communities, power-
ful arguments and tools from outside
the traditional arena of design are
needed to broaden the critique and
clarify the choices. These must com-
bine a rigorous understanding of the
real costs to society and individuals of
the status quo and a renewal of com-
munication values of responsibility,
connectedness and concern for health,
safety, well-being and hope.

We must learn to do this for the
whole place and the entire population,
not just for me and mine.