The presentations made by mayors at the Mayors Institute on City Design are testimony to the powers of place. These elected officials are people who care deeply for the places in which they live, who know that community character plays an important role in the lives of their citizens. None suggested that a city was admirable because it was indistinguishable from others, none offered testimony for anomie and placelessness.
Mayors are people who work connections. Perhaps they are unusual in this regard, more aware and interested in the average citizen, but they were elected because they possess the confidence of the community, the means of understanding, and the abilities. They work mainly and often to the best of what they have, open experiments for new development, and to the limitations that organic cities can tolerate. They seek to discover what the cities can do, and do without help from the government. They do.

Many of the problems mayors bring to the Mayor’s Institute involve replacing something about their community that has been lost: main streets that have been abandoned in favor of outlying shopping centers, manufacturing districts that no longer have viable industries, waterfronts that have experienced a succession of uses and are now little more than wastelands, places to gather that no longer function as community meeting places, streets that are no longer pleasant to walk on. These together lead to a loss of identity, to the absence of any distinct character in the city that can be recognized and nurtured as a source of community pride and identity.

Often the situations mayors confront result from changing economic conditions — conditions that are altering the ways in which we live, work, exchange goods and conduct business. These changes are often exacerbated by the translation of real estate, which is rooted in locales, into mortgage assets and leases that are transferable, held by parties completely remote from and disinterested in local concerns. Several mayors brought problems resulting from redevelopment programs, intended to attract investment and tax dollars; the programs, however, proved to be over-scaled and inappropriate, adding to the community’s sense of loss and dislocation rather than contributing to its sense of well-being. Still other issues stem from narrowly focused efforts to solve specific problems, often ignoring the very complex web of relationships inherent in city form.

The problems are endemic, but there are ways to overcome them. Many remedies have been suggested by Mayor’s Institute participants, remedies that are cast in the particulars of the place being discussed. Here I will gather some observations, gleaned through discussions at the national and regional institutes held over the last decade, into some common themes. These are ways not only to replace qualities that have been lost, but also to re-place projects in their context, people in their communities, cities in their landscapes. They are valuable not only for mayors, but for all those who take part in the commissions, workshops, meetings and debates that accompany change.
Oakland, California

Downtown’s Patient Progress

Oakland’s downtown, long neglected to the point of some public derision, has finally overcome the misspecifying fascination of that prospect. The city is recovering its downtown in an incremental fashion and devising ways to extend the benefits of government rebuilding into surrounding areas.

For many years the center of Oakland had a huge hole designated to become a regional center. Finally, in a change of strategy, the city took a measured approach. First, it supported a modest, small-scale complex of retail, office and public spaces adjacent to one of its downtown BART rapid transit stations. Then it landed a large, attractive federal building (with ground-floor retail frontage and a glass atrium) to the edge of that complex, and a state office building next to that.

Most recently, the city has committed its own (earthquake induced) office expansion to the creation of a civic center that respects the cadence and character of the surrounding downtown district, in part by restoring a historic office building that serves as a visual landmark for the key downtown intersection.

In his presentation to MDS West, Mayor Elihu
Re-Placing

The charge for the leadership of the city is to pay sufficient attention to both the needs of new enterprises and the qualities that have created value in the city in the first place — then to set the ground for continuing evolution. To remain healthy, cities need to respond effectively to new challenges while remaining firm in their commitment to creating good places, places that nurture and support responsible citizenship, places where people love to be.

To ensure that the best qualities of a place are conserved and extended, the citizens, staff, and leadership of a city must require that new uses are fit carefully and strategically within the city fabric. New projects must be connected to what is presently there — re-placed, not just inserted — developed in sympathy with the way that citizens have thought about the place. They must give new impetus to historic patterns or sometimes substitute whole new patterns in a way that is considerate of the present and previous structure.

In the fabric of the city itself there should be a steady insistence on its most essential, characterizing aspects. These may be a particular style of building, as in Santa Barbara, a network of discernible relationships and careful details, as in Savannah, or a distinct relation to the natural landscape, as in Bozeman, Montana, whose mayor described the city’s structure almost entirely in terms that related to the experience of the grand and beautiful landscape around it.

The terms of these relations are often fragile. Only by informed and persistent attention to the decisions that make up a city does a true sense of place emerge and hold the imagination of its citizens. Through their constant attention, mayors become designers of the cities entrusted to their care.

Case study images:
Left: Proposed civic center, with new construction to the left, the rehabilitated city hall in the center and the addition to the Broadway building on the right. Courtesy C.W. Veroira and J.H. Chadburn Associates. Center: Summary sketch of opportunities in downtown Oakland. Courtesy MCD (Wes), Below: City Center, a retail and office complex, was the first step in reinvigorating Oakland’s downtown. Courtesy Oakland Convention Bureau.

Harris highlighted his concern for finding a strategy that would extend outward the new energies being brought into downtown, particularly along two main streets, Broadway and Telegraph Avenue. Such plans could use to advantage the area’s remarkable heritage of terra-cotta commercial buildings and the uniquely distinguished, Art Deco Paramount and Fox Theatres.

The discussion centered on finding incremental strategies for change rather than counting on still another version of the previously hoped for megaproject. This mall, with five department stores, would have combined renovation with new construction, so the city had not undertaken demolition in the area. Thus this extended district has considerable resources with which to work: a DART stop in its midst, a mix of building sizes that allow for differing forms of initial investment, existing businesses (including a department store), cultural programming in the restored Paramount Theatre, a new pair of ice-skating rinks brought in by the redevelopment agency and the new development energy the office initiatives bring.

Oakland has set the stage for a gradual but effective change in the viability of these downtown spaces along the traditional spine of the city.
It would have been understandable had Mayor Ronald Norick curtailed his trip to the Mayor's Institute last April. Days before, a bomb had destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in his city. The blast killed 169 people, injured hundreds and damaged more than 300 buildings. But Norick honored his commitment. He came away with inspiration for a community-based planning process to help the area recover, and a promise of support from Samina Qureshi, director of the HEA design program.

The Murrah building was situated at the north edge of downtown. Before the disaster, this was a fringe area, zoned for industrial uses and occupied by offices, small shops and parking. After the blast, the area experienced severe decline; businesses closed or moved because of building damage and took away customers from businesses that remained. Clearly, the rebuilding process would require a new way of looking at the area.

In May, the HEA sent a fact-finding team of design professionals; the consensus from these meetings was to launch an inclusive planning process that would engage the energies and talents of the local design community, business owners and citizens. “It took outside perspective to say, ‘You have talent and we can help you with more,’” Norick said. “We were in such a constant crisis that we didn’t have time to think through those steps,” recalls Jackie Jones, executive director of the Arts Council of Oklahoma City. The team’s skills and the subsequent planning effort were hosted by the Arts Council, the city’s planning department and the 21st Century Oklahoma City Urban Renewal Authority.

It's about community collaboration. (Including designers and area property owners) were organized into six "district teams," each focusing on a specific area of downtown. For three weeks, they examined the issues, developed opportunities and
marketing images found in the media may be more familiar to incoming residents than the city’s actual form, landscape or climate; traditional values may not be a part of any living understanding of the place.

To ensure that the city develops in a coherent fashion, each of its parts builds towards a larger whole, it is necessary to build public understanding of the city’s various parts, the ways in which they relate to each other and the resources already invested there. This requires a long, ambitious and continuous public education process, one that can likely only take place in segments, with neighborhoods and interest groups providing the initial impetus.

Structured properly, the processes of planning can themselves become an extended education program for the city. Walking tours, surveys, participation workshops and invited lecturers all can be utilized in shaping issues, focusing attention on the qualities of the place and inviting people to care about — not simply accept or ignore — the conditions of the city. Often there are rich resources at hand; extensive collections of historical photographs, maps that are stored in city archives and, most importantly, citizens and professionals who are committed to building a broader understanding of the roots of the community and the various ways it might see its future. Cities do well to capture the devotion of these people, encourage their coordination and open opportunities for education, deliberation and debate.

Mayors can play an essential leadership role in bringing issues to public consciousness, but often feel best to enter an arena that has been delegated to planners and design professionals. Frequently mayors, who know their cities well, have mentioned that the Mayors’ Institute sessions have helped them to trust their own intuitions and introduced them to a language for communicating about design issues, which they previously had difficulty discussing. Several mayors returned to their cities and set up similar case review and discussion sessions, some involving city staff, some involving the general public.


explored concepts to rebuild the area. In July, the national design panel reconvened and synthesized the “intelligent teams’” ideas into both early action and long term plans. Shortly after the bombing, the federal government allocated Oklahoma City $39 million in emergency community development funds, and the planning process established a framework for how to spend the money, planning director Garner told us. About half will be spent stabilizing and demolishing damaged buildings, half on long-term capital improvements.

The idea generated by a district team, the redesign of Broadway Avenue, will be the first project to receive funding. A longer term goal will be to develop entertainment activities that build on the street’s “Automobile Alley” image, such as a cruise, night or outdoor movie. “The process brought together people who wouldn’t have otherwise met each other,” Staff remarked. “Property owners got to know local designers, and the federal money comes in, hire them to do the work. They were all part of the team and sympathetic to it, and can help the property owners understand why it is a good idea to follow the recommendations.” “What this workshop did for many of us was give us permission to look forward instead of backwards,” Jensen concluded. “That was really critical at that time for this city. Not without respect, but we had to take responsibility for rebuilding.” — Todd W. Brown
Establishing Connections to the Larger Natural Environment

Time and again people lose sight of the natural features that have formed their cities. Often, the natural characteristics of a place have been so important to its growth and expansion that they have been invaded by growth and submerged in construction.

Mayors often come to the institute seeking advice about recovering their cities’ sense of connection to the water. Many cities were founded in proximity to creeks, rivers or harbors, but these waterfronts have very often become neglected or abused. Usually the purposes for which the waterfront is useful have changed entirely. Places that once were landing, launching and landing areas, zones for marinas, truckers and fishermen, are now being designated recreation spots, with lunching, jogging and cycling or simply quiet contemplation, as the primary engines for change.

The management of water, its distribution as a resource and its reclamation from wastes, was once relegated to the status of an unimportant utility. But now it requires conscious choices, which can contribute to the overall development of the city. Many mayors bring cases having to do with the management of water resources — from Tulsa, Okla., where the use of a floodplain for recreational purposes is being debated, to Gilbert, Ariz., where the treatment and disposition of sewage effluent has become a tool for the development of recreational areas and places for wildlife observation and education.

More soberly, the inherent structure of the land has been often been obscured by filling wetlands and hollows or cutting hills, making it difficult to understand the natural and human history of the place. Wetlands are an essential part of the ecological conditions that support wildlife habitat and they provide means for absorbing runoff in periods of high flow. Creek restoration and wetlands preservation are becoming part of the repertoire of city design — albeit sometimes with talk of restoration that seems altogether improbable, and of mitigations that are, at best, contrived.

Programs that pursue natural resource protection and enhancement can be a powerful tool for city design. However, when left to develop according to single-purpose criteria they can be as limiting as single-minded economies — inhibiting, rather than encouraging the creative incorporation of landscape factors into patterns that restore a sense of wholeness to the place.

Gilbert, Ariz., sought to couple the expansion of its sewage plant with educational and recreational activities. New recharge ponds include interpretive exhibits, and possibilities for a demonstration irrigation projects and for linkages with nearby canals and greenways were nurtured by the Mayors’ Institute resource loans. Drawings courtesy MCD: West; posters courtesy City of Gilbert.
Finding Consistencies

Citizens construct their sense of place through thousands of daily interactions, the conscious memories of which attach themselves to surprisingly few landmarks and events. Instead, people's sense of belonging to a place is grounded in the ubiquitous relationships among buildings — their frequency and position, their materials and form of construction, the character of their faces and the entries they turn to the public way — and to the layout and design of the roads, paths and landscapes that thread through the city.

When there is consistency in these elements and relationships, it is easier for people to form memories and to recognize common interests; it is more likely that these elements will attract allegiances and set the stage for continued development. Main streets, both the Disney and the "main streets" program versions, demonstrate the hold that a consistent (not strictly repetitive) pattern of buildings and streetscape can have on the imaginations of those who live in a place. Vigorously designed buildings from the past can also play a large role in determining city form, triggering concepts and emotions that can be shared, marking out reference points in the structure of the city.

Many cases that mayors have brought to the institutes involve the reuse of valued buildings. These buildings often serve as a good rallying point for change, allowing the affections that have developed around historic structures to spread to their surroundings and to set standards for the nature of what should be adjoining. With an example of genuinely significant design as the core element of an area, it is easier for communities to see the need for and to demand suitaly scaled and carefully designed buildings.

Buildings that play a very significant role in defining the structure of the city and carry the memory of its history deserve uses that embellish their presence. Appropriate use is a judgment call, however, and is sometimes contentious, pitting concerns for preservation against claims for entrepreneurial vision.

We live in circumstances different than those that produced almost any building that is a candidate for historic preservation. There are, however, constancies in type of use and purpose that extend well beyond any given time period, and there...
should be a serious search for uses that require similar dimensions, take advantage of the design elements incorporated in the building and can be suitably supportive to neighboring activities.

The retention of appropriate use and form in significant buildings is also of great importance to maintaining the structure of the city fabric — the cadence established by street intersections, building entries, the size of structures and the network of open spaces and vegetation that runs through the city and determines much of its character.

In case after case, mayors present problems created by changes in the location and size of roads or the rerouting of fundamental importation patterns so they privilege through traffic. Such actions tear apart the equilibrium of places and call forth new patterns of movement and ways of building that are not appropriate for their location. Walter Kulash, elsewhere in this issue, discerns a growing sense among traffic engineers and transportation planners that they must balance the goal of maximum traffic flow with other objectives in order to create effective and pleasurable streets.

Streets are not the only public infrastructure that must be carefully considered. The provision of lighting, utilities and communication systems, the disposition of sewage and storm water — the facilities required to support the life of the place — all need attention. Replacing means equipping the area for the lives that will be lived there and making advantage of each act of construction to add to the qualities of the place.

Left to its own devices each city agency, like an individual corporation, will take action on its own terms, oblivious of larger opportunities for coordination. Streets will be resurfaced even while plans are being considered for their reconfiguration; trees will be brutally trimmed for maintenance convenience in areas where their shade and form are essential to the creation of handsome public ways. Mayors and city managers must take decisive action to bring the various agencies of government together, to reclaim purposeful control over all the actions of the city and put all capital investments, even of the most modest sort, to work in building a cohesive place.
Locating New Centers of Vitality

Perhaps the most difficult challenge for mayors is to nurture and encourage the kinds of imagination that will bring new life and energy to the city. Cities are evolving entities; they cannot reflect only their past. Buildings and public spaces need to support the places of which they are a part; they need to also bring new vitality into the city — contribute to, not merely enhance, its heritage. Traces of genuinely imaginative vision are necessary for future interest in a community.

Bringing people into an area that has been neglected or abandoned is often difficult, but it is one of the most essential strategies for inducing vitality. At first this may be through holding special events, festivals, markets, walks and information sessions. Most effectively this will include the location of simple civic structures that focus public interest, such as the Public Boat House in Burling- ton, Vermont. Many cities have also used the...
resources of their local art communities to bring initial attention to a place and demonstrate care, creating surprising juxtapositions of form, color or content that spark a new look at existing opportunities or announce the presence of underrepresented ethnic communities.

Uses that can benefit from even short-term occupation of existing structures give an interim vitality that wards away vandalism and degradation. Professional offices and smaller start-up companies that cannot afford major installations frequently partake in the regeneration of an area. In many cities pioneer uses have included adventurous forms of housing; housing that is based on the conversion of existing structures spared by the conventional market, or live-work units that are created out of building types not normally used for housing.

Encouraging the formation of groups of such uses may take some time and individual attention, but such efforts are often able to take hold and to bring areas back into the life of the city, faster and better than more wholesale means. Massive redevelopment projects that are dependent on large-scale market conditions often lead to long delays and a loss of local control. Businesses that have a stake in the local community and are prepared to make an extra effort to take advantage of the place can more immediately set the tone for development.

But locating people in an area is not enough. To spur new life and interest in the place, people must be visibly evident. Buildings and open spaces should be designed so that they reveal and celebrate the activities that take place in and around them. Buildings designed as stripes and mirrors project a world alien from individual human interpretation and involvement — a world where personal interests are disenfranchised. Such places proclaim loudly their interchangeability, their owners’ allegiance to abstracted ideals and their ready dispossession of local constraints, sensibilities and implications.

Requiring that buildings be designed with human-scaled elements and include places for external use and repose will not, in itself, transform corporate strategy — yet calling business to account as a participant in the creation of amenable cities is part of the evolution of a new attitude towards community responsibility, a new sense for the importance of human experience and sustaining values.
A Long-Term Process: Short-Term Urgency

Mayors coming to the institute know that effective city design is a long-term process. It will take years of continual attention before coming fully to fruition. Yet mayors are pressured to take immediate, short-term actions that will maintain interest in the place and demonstrate its effectiveness as a city steward.

There are many versions of the long-term/short-term dilemma, ranging from financing schemes that involve bonding to the timing of public improvements that will eventually foster change in the private sector. A recurrent theme in cases brought by the mayors is the tension between the pressure for immediate action and the prospects of long-term benefits that may accrue if land is held in reserve for future development. Since land in a city remains a part of the everyday experience of the place, its character influences...
the perception of the city, whether or not there are plans for its future. Vacant lots represent opportu-
nity when interest in development is high; yet some neglect and abandonment when there is no
evident indication that they are valued. Action is required, and mayors are called upon to forge
viable tactics for the present as well as to help con-
struct an image of the future.

Those who wish to make change — whether political leaders, entrepreneurs of development,
planners and urban designers or neighborhood
activists — must assemble the authority to act.
Only by subjecting proposals that have city-
changing potential to informed public scrutiny,
making sure that they are re-placed within a larger
context, will these proposals be truly understood.
And by engaging citizens in a series of such
processes the issues can become a part of public
discourse, forging the elements of mutual under-
standing and common aspirations that lend
authority for decisive change. That authority will
evaporate, however, if no actions take place.

Mayors frequently have the unenviable task of
needing to sort their way through an array of
bewildering proposals and recommendations —
all the while maintaining a steady presence in the
public eye, getting on with the responsibilities of
leadership when the path is not yet clear.
Understanding and articulating those things that make
their community distinct, that lie at the root of
their community’s identity, can serve as a rallying
point for mayors, city staff and constituents as
they track a path through conflicting claims and
counter visions — re-placeing elements of the city
so that they will respond to present need while
building cities that future generations will happily
call home.

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This image of Diagonal’s Eastern Market originally
appeared in Public Market and Community Revitalization
(New York: Project for Public Spaces, 1995).

Case Study Illustrations:
Left: Woonerf developed for task force working team.
Center: Waterfront area.
Right: Stockton Hotel.

The panel asked Darnah to initiate an extended com-
munity process to look at public involvement and confidence
in the waterfront’s future.
Following this advice, Darnah initiated a process that began
with a site visit and presenta-
tion to the city council by
Santina Durand, director of
the National Endowment
for the Arts Design Program. Next
Darnah appointed a twenty-
eight person task force and
formed a consultant team con-
sisting of an urban designer,
landscape architect, economic
development specialists and
workshop organizers.
The consultants’ work
work with the task force and city
staff has included finding
ways to reprise the struc-
ture of the city and the
characteristics of the site
into the public consciousness.
Based on their own analysis, the consultants
organized walks and a boat trip to
familiarize the task force with
the site and its potential, and
made presentations regard-
ing waterfront developments
in other communities.
The task force met fre-
frequently in 1995, processing
opportunities for various
groups to present program
ideas and development
schemes. It conducted two
public workshops and as-
sumed the viability and desir-
ability of various land use and
design arrangements.
Just a little more than one
year from Darnah’s visit to
the institute, the Task Force
endorsed a long-term vision
for the area and a series of
short-term actions by serious
agency staff that will lead
to further growth and
improve the waterfront. These
will include making the point an
animated family recreation
area and water’s ground for
the whole city, repairing the head
of the channel and creating a
“water square” fronting the
hotel Stockton and furthering
incremental waterfront develop-
ment in ways that make
effective connection to exist-
ing neighborhoods.
Immediate actions, some
already initiated, include
promoting cultural and
recreational events along the
water to encourage public
involvement; ensuring the
benefits of a street improve-
ments program to refurbish
the edge of the point and
greening significant portions
of the open land.
The task force, with
involvement in the process
with media coverage that has
taken a new con-
sciousness of the city’s assets.
A variety of investors have
used the forum provided by
the planning process to air
their interests and test public
reaction to development
proposals. The mayor has
confidence that positive
change is underway.