

This article appeared in *Harvard Design Magazine*, Spring/Summer 2008, Number 28. To order this issue or a subscription, visit the HDM homepage at <<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/hdm>>.

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## Can Good Design Advance Urban Development?

*On the Harvard Design Magazine Symposium "Can Design Improve Life in Cities? The Cases of Los Angeles, London, and Chicago"*  
by **Tim Love**

### SYMPOSIUM MODERATORS

**Alex Krieger**, professor in practice of urban design, founding principal, Chan Krieger & Associates, Cambridge; consultant on urban design to cities including Washington, DC

**William S. Saunders**, editor, *Harvard Design Magazine*

### INTRODUCTIONS

**Drew Gilpin Faust**, president, Harvard University

**Alan A. Altshuler**, dean, Harvard University Graduate School of Design

**Alex Krieger**

### ON LONDON

**Bob Allies**, architect, Allies and Morrison, part of the Olympics master planning team

**Peter Bishop**, director, Design for London

**Jason Prior**, president, EDAW, London; master planners for the Lower Lea Valley Olympic and Legacy, and Olympic Park plans

**Paul Morrell**, chartered quantity surveyor; formerly senior partner, Davis Langdon London; deputy chair, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, UK

### ON LOS ANGELES

**Dana Cuff**, professor of architecture and urban

design and director of cityLAB, UCLA; author, *The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism*

**Cecilia Estolano**, chief executive officer, Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles

**Christopher Hawthorne**, architectural critic, *Los Angeles Times*

**Scott Johnson**, design partner, Johnson Fain, Los Angeles

**Martha Welborne**, managing director of the Grand Avenue Committee

**William Witte**, president, Related California

**Craig Webb**, senior design partner, Gehry Partners, Los Angeles

### ON CHICAGO

**Sam Assefa**, director of policy, Chicago Department of Planning and Development

**MarySue Barrett**, president, Metropolitan Planning Council, Chicago

**Philip Enquist**, Urban Design Partner, SOM, Chicago

**Rich Hanson**, president, Mesa Development, developers of high-rises near Millennium Park

**Stanley Tigerman**, architect, Tigerman McCurry, Chicago; director, Archeworks, Chicago

**Craig Webb**

# On Urban Design

On November 7 and 8, 2007, the *Harvard Design Magazine* held its second conference, conceived and organized by HDM Editor William Saunders and GSD professor Alex Krieger, on the role of design in the larger agenda of global cities. London, Los Angeles, and Chicago were explored by public agency representatives, planners, and architects giving wide-ranging accounts of urban development initiatives in which well-publicized urban design efforts or a signature project may have played a significant role in catalyzing urban redevelopment. As at the previous HDM symposium, the audience was invitation-only and included architects, planners, city officials, and developers. Borrowing a strategy from other areas of the University, the symposium was partly organized as a *Harvard Design Magazine* fundraising event; attendance cost \$1,300. Perhaps the exclusiveness of the meeting and the magazine's well-connected Practitioners' Advisory Board helped generate an impressive turnout. Hugh Hardy, Marilyn Taylor, and Bart Voorsanger, among several New York-based architects and planners, were in the audience of over fifty mid- and late-career practitioners and policy gurus.

The primary insights the conference offered came in the comparison of the relative roles that different constituencies play in the city-building initiatives of the three cities. London, for example, is a city where public agencies are playing a lead role in the revitalization of large tracts, provoked partly by needs for the 2012 Olympic Games. At the same time, London's metropolitan government, despite the fact that this city is made of village-like boroughs, is centralized enough to do planning at a regional scale.

Regional planning in Los Angeles, in contrast, is crippled by an ill-defined overlap of jurisdictional boundaries between municipal governments and the County of Los Angeles. Urban redevelopment is therefore focused on block-by-block initiatives. The Grand Avenue Project, an ambitious development proposed adjacent to the *Disney Concert Hall*, served as an example of the way that philanthropic efforts can spur private real estate development.

Chicago, with its now-famous *Millennium Park*, offered an example of a much-lauded third way. There tax increment financing together with corporate and individual sponsorship, packaged by a strong mayor, paid for an iconic and renowned park that spawned a nearby residential real estate boom.

But beyond clarifying the socio-economic and political differences between cities, the conference also raised issues about the role of design as both instigator and useful illustrator of city-building goals. The *Tate Modern* in London, *Disney Concert Hall* in Los Angeles, and *Millennium Park* in Chicago are cultural projects with civic-scale aspirations that jump-started the influx of capital and development projects in adjacent neighborhoods as much because of their memorable images and effective publicity as because of their particular programming.

The *Millennium Park* design process resulted in postcard-ready images at several scales, including the aerial view dominated by Frank Gehry's basket-like trellis over the great lawn facing the stage, but also including the *Crown Fountain* by Jaume Plensa and *Cloud Gate*, Anish Kapoor's great mirrored kidney bean. The *Tate Modern* appropriated a building that already resonated with Londoners, but with the addition of Herzog & DeMeuron's glass box and Norman Foster (and Arup's) pedestrian bridge, the complex has become one of the most identifiable images of the City.

The sessions included presentations devoted to specific nearby development projects that both benefited from and responded to the instigating cultural institution. Robert Allies of Allies & Morrison, a London-based architecture firm, presented a commercial development project a few blocks from the *Tate Modern* that derived its specific form from the pedestrian desire lines that lead from Kings Cross station to the Thames waterfront. Allies also presented his firm's rehabilitation of Basil Spence's 1960s-era *National Theatre*, one of several cultural institutions that create a continuous sweep of public activities along the south side of the Thames. In that project, the most significant renovations occurred in

the urban space between the north face of the theater and the river. With deft sectional moves, the architects were able to create a terraced piazza that negotiated the grade between the ground level of the complex and the esplanade along the Thames.

Rich Hanson, a real estate developer, was Chicago's spokesperson for projects that have benefited from *Millennium Park*. He has built two luxury high-rise condominiums on nearby Wabash Street. By virtue of the heights of the buildings he has constructed, the majority of the residents can look over the shorter buildings on Michigan Avenue into the park and beyond to Lake Michigan. Hanson walked the audience through the accumulated logics that made luxury high-rise development along Wabash Avenue south of Randolph Street a no-brainer. In addition to realizing that the park would become a marketable amenity for nearby residential development, Hanson was canny enough to realize that the recently enacted landmarking of the buildings along Michigan Avenue would forever fix the height of the existing buildings and thus add enormous value to real estate parcels one row back on Wabash. Reading into the comments made by the Chicago panel during the course of the session, it became clear that Hanson was not just a shrewd businessperson that the organizers had invited to add a touch of midwestern pragmatism, but also a developer held in high esteem by local academics and philanthropic organizations. Hanson seems to be one of the supporters of Stanley Tigerman's entrepreneurial quasi-academic endeavor aimed at producing an alternative vision for Chicago's bid for the 2016 Olympics.

If Hanson saw the benefits of *Millennium Park* and leveraged a signature project for an independent entrepreneurial initiative, the relationship between the *Disney Concert Hall* and collateral development is much more strategically parasitic. Eli Broad, real estate developer and philanthropist, was instrumental in catalyzing financial support for the stalled *Disney Concert Hall* and then provided the proactive leadership to galvanize the City and County of Los Angeles to redevelop

adjacent underdeveloped parcels. To achieve his vision, Broad pushed for the creation of the Los Angeles Grand Avenue Authority, a government agency, and the Grand Avenue Committee, a parallel private corporation, which are working in tandem to oversee the creative redevelopment of the area. In a 2005 op-ed piece, Martin Kaplan, Associate Dean of the USC Annenberg School, wrote: “The upside of the planning process so far has been its benevolent despotism, which has overcome inertia and infighting to push the project to this point. The Grand Avenue Committee, chaired by billionaire developer and philanthropist Eli Broad, has pulled together the Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency, the county Board of Supervisors and other city and state players.”<sup>1</sup>

Dana Cuff, Professor at UCLA, characterized the citizens of greater LA as “shareholders” in their relationship to downtown, a clever turn of phrase since Broad is the Co-Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Grand Avenue Committee. Cuff suggested that like shareholders of a corporation, the citizens of LA want a “return on investment” with the Grand Avenue Project, meaning mostly “an interesting place to go” much like the *Third Street Promenade* in Santa Monica and other walkable but manufactured mixed-use environments. Interestingly, and unlike in the cases of the development projects near the *Tate Modern* in London and *Millennium Park* in Chicago, the signature architect responsible for the catalyzing civic building, Gehry Partners, was invited back for an encore. Frank Gehry’s office is the lead architect for Related, the designated developer for the Grand Avenue Project, located across the street from the *Concert Hall*. While the images of the Gehry project suggested that the design was relatively far along and was chockablock with fidgety massing that promised a rich experience at the ground plane, the sixteen-acre park, the primary “community benefit” of the large development, was underdeveloped and unremarkable. Given all of the compositional energy in the spaces between the buildings and on the lower stories of the Gehry project, pro-

voked by an active retail edge, it was disappointing that so little attention was paid to the relationship between the landscape and the edges of the surrounding buildings in the park design.

As the stories about urban redevelopment accumulated, it became clear that it is can-do process narratives themselves (as much as finished projects) that serve as catalysts for continuing redevelopment; in fact, the symposium itself was a high-profile opportunity to tell the story again but on a national and even international stage. But what is the relationship between signature design projects, politics, and sophisticated public relations strategies? Again, the three subject cities were useful case studies. For Chicago, virtually all credit for prioritizing smart ideas and putting the pieces together points back to Mayor Richard M. Daley. The greater benefit to the Mayor is an increase in political capital on top of the expected economic development. Perhaps that is why the PowerPoint presentations by MarySue Barrett, President of the Metropolitan Planning Council and former Chief of Policy for Mayor Daley, and Sam Assefa, Director of Policy for Chicago’s Department of Planning and Development, were standard-issue government agency-designed presentations complete with bulleted word slides in Times New Roman font and stock photography of happy citizens. Certainly, for the policy makers in Chicago, “design” means signature architecture, but the importance of design does not trickle down to the look and feel of the marketing collateral of city agencies and allied policy organizations. In other words, Chicago’s primary pitch was “This is a great city to get things done,” but not necessarily a city that promotes innovative design at a wide range of scales and for multiple audiences.

The representatives from London, in stark contrast, seemed to be on message with their consistently well-designed presentations. Most impressive was the presentation by Peter Bishop, Director of Design for London, a new governmental organization that “will coordinate the mayor’s architectural and urban design strategies.” The diagrams, plans, and

renderings of the several ambitious but surgical urban design interventions in central London were unparalleled at the symposium and equal the best urban design work being done today. Perhaps it is the brand consciousness of British culture in general, as exemplified by Cool Britannica, Sirs Charles and Maurice Saatchi, and Virgin President Sir Richard Branson, as well as the complex physical and political challenges of redeveloping the dense heart of London, that make both the design work and the narratives that accompany it seem more sophisticated.

Paul Morrell, until recently a senior partner at the London-based construction management firm Davis Langdon and now a “regular conference speaker and columnist,” made it clear how much design quality is a primary policy objective of Mayor Ken Livingstone’s administration, not just in terms of signature projects but also in all aspects of everyday life. Morrell was one of the few speakers to distinguish between manifestations of “high design” as exemplified by the shape-making that characterizes London’s recent spate of signature high-rises such as Sir Norman Foster’s “Gherkin” and “good design,” projects that “look like they belong where they are.” It was clear from the London presentations that the official embrace of signature projects had almost run its course and that official London was aiming for a more Sir Terence Conran-like conception of design-for-the-masses.

The voice of design commitment in Los Angeles came in the form of Frank Gehry as represented by Craig Webb, Gehry’s partner, suggesting that in the U.S., if not London, the brand name associated with the initiative matters almost as much as the specific attributes of the proposal. Perhaps the lesson for North American cities is that design does matter, not only in the creation of signature projects but also for less splashy urban design interventions. At the same time, the symposium highlighted the importance of the design quality in the visual rhetoric of city-building, whether PowerPoint presentations or marketing brochures.

London understands the value of projecting an image of a city that supports design quality in all facets of life, including product, graphic, and media design. Unfortunately, the message of the symposium is that the policy-makers and thought-leaders in American cities see the value of high design only in signature civic projects by star architects, not pervasively in our culture. Is design good for urban development? The answer is “Yes,” but a design culture is sustainable only in cultures with an appreciation of “high design” as an integrated philosophy at a variety of scales and for a diversity of audiences. □

**NOTE**

1. Martin Kaplan, “Pump Genius into Our Park,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 17, 2005.