# THEDESIGN
# dividend

AMADIE HART

**The context of the city is a greater determinant of good design than any individual building or single design element.**

How do you define good design? This question was posed to a panel of developers and city officials at ULI's fall meeting this October in Denver—just as it first had been posed this past summer to a group of architects and urban designers gathered at the ULI headquarters in Washington, D.C. (See "Return on Perception," October, page 125). Both sessions were conceived to solicit input on the "design dividend"—the added value generated by good design—for a forthcoming ULI publication, *Return on Perception*.



Elizabeth Sanders    M.J. "Jay" Brodie    Denise Gamman    Mark Johnson

While both groups—whether architects/urban designers or developers/city officials—were somewhat vague in their definition of "good design," they all agreed that it is not characterized by iconic or flashy buildings. Instead, they agreed, the context of a city—that is, the elements that fit together to make up the larger urban fabric—is a greater determinant of good design than any individual building or single design element.

"There is a difference between what it takes to make a great city and a great building," maintained Jay Brodie, president of the Baltimore Economic Development Corporation, at the fall meeting. "Great cities have texture." The other panelists concurred, noting that good design has a human scale, creating buildings that are "timeless and of their time," as were the Carnegie libraries, suggested Jonathan F.P. Rose, president of the Jonathan Rose Companies LLC, based in Katonah, New York.

But without a concrete definition of good design, how can architects and urban designers create high-quality buildings and urban spaces? Some communities have turned to design guidelines to help them maintain high design quality. When moderator Mark Johnson, principal at Denver-based Civitas Inc., asked the panelists whether design is something that guidelines can produce, the responses were split. Rose, in particular, said he does not like design guidelines. "They're useful

Often, the challenge in creating a well-designed community is getting the public and city officials to understand the benefits good design can bestow. "As a designer, I spend a lot of time trying to get people to understand the value of design," said Johnson, though he admitted that the new urbanist movement has done a lot to increase public awareness of the importance of design. Johnson and Rose both bemoaned a lack of understanding at the government level of the fundamentals of urban planning and design. Johnson expressed concern about the tendency of government officials to find a design they like in one community and then want it transferred to their own community—without realizing the complexity of doing so. Rose, on the other hand, said he believes this occurs in part because of the negative public perception of government service. "If you are a great planner, where would you want to work?" asked Rose. "The best talent is going to the private sector; the private sector is more aspirational."


Jonathan F.P. Rose


Elizabeth S. Sanders

"There is a difference between what it takes to make a **GREAT CITY** and a **GREAT BUIDING.**"

tools to prevent bad things from happening," he said, "but they do not allow extraordinary things to happen." He acknowledged, however, that design guidelines create value for future homeowners and retailers so that they know what they are getting when they invest in a community.

Denise Gammon, senior vice president for development with Forest City Stapleton in Denver, had a more positive view of the role played by design guidelines, explaining that they were critical in the development of Stapleton in that they managed expectations. The important thing, she noted, was that the Stapleton guidelines were prescriptive, but flexible. However, today—only five years after they were adopted—they are already dated, she noted.

The ultimate problem, the panelists agreed, is that it takes visionary leadership to make good design a priority for cities. "It is up to the people in this room and [ULI] to get the political leaders to understand [the value of good design]," said Brodie. "We need to infiltrate these values into the political decision making and get people interested." In response, Rose noted that the not-for-profit sector is beginning to push cities on the issue, becoming more powerful and more activist. Brodie agreed. "We've seen the reemergence of organizations, and they're doing more than in the past," he said. "It is unreasonable to expect people in the political world to have design ideas. It is up to the people who are in the business to come up with the ideas."


Jay Brodie

**Denise Gammon**


**Mark Johnson**

"**GREEN SPACE** can differentiate cities in competition" because it is a qualitative measure of a city's **LIVABILITY.**

One challenge to government-based design leadership is the transitory nature of elected office. Gammon and Johnson discussed their experience in developing Stapleton, which spanned two mayoral administrations in Denver. It was not leadership that sustained the project through nearly a decade of development, but instead the community's "green book"—its development plan, which guided the principles and form at Stapleton. The book was created through input from seven years of public meetings, and thereby embodied the community's voice and its desires for the former airport site. "The green book is what saved the project, because there was enough community commitment," explained Johnson. "The private sector funded a great deal of the work, and they made sure the idea wasn't forgotten in the change between administrations."

One important role for government is in overcoming public opposition to good design. NIMBYism can stall even the best-designed projects with concerns about density and the problems the public associates with dense projects. "Communities always boil things down to simple things they know—traffic, building height, shadows—and rephrase it as 'density,'" which is too vague, explained Johnson. "Government needs to start the debate and show people alternatives."

With the many roadblocks to encouraging good design in communities, why would a city want to make the effort necessary to commit to good design? The panelists pointed out that cities today face a great deal of competition for residents and economic development from neighboring cities, cities across the country, and cities around the world. Urban design elements—such as human-scale development, parks, and walkability—are what make cities more attractive as places to live, the

panelists agreed. The elements of high-quality design give cities an edge on the competition. "Green space can differentiate cities in competition," explained Johnson, because it is a qualitative measure of a city's livability.

But it is even more basic than that. "If you make a place that is good for children and old people, you make a place that is good for everybody," noted Elizabeth S. Sanders, executive director of the Downtown Mobile Alliance in Mobile, Alabama, citing the Project for Public Spaces guidelines on what makes a good public space. Johnson stressed that it is the simple things that appeal to people. "The population of this country today, in a surprising way, wants to reconnect to things that are fundamental to human nature—going for a walk, getting together, smelling fresh air."

This return to simplicity is what is driving the return to cities, suggested Brodie. "There is a lot of space in America, but not enough time in your life. People are starting to reexamine their lives and time and wondering what the alternative is to sitting in traffic."

It is hard to pinpoint just what it is that makes a building or city well designed. However, one thing that has to be present is the commitment of city leaders, residents, architects, and developers to the time and effort required to fashion a design that fits the context and the needs of the city. **UL**

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