Cities of Culture, Cities of Places

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The problem that inspired the competition—the lack of dialogue about the city of the future—seems as evident in the case of Milwaukee as it is in the case of a metropolis many times more problematic, like Mexico City. The complexity and fragmentation of urban government precludes the possibility of sustaining a continued dialogue capable of producing general and plausible concepts for the not-so-distant future.

The ICDC has been a unique and very valuable endeavor, supported in good measure by the excellent program prepared by the organizers. It has been a success in terms of response to the competition because there were around 240 entries from a wide variety of countries. But concerning the nature and quality of the projects, the results are not easy to assess.

In spite of the program's emphasis on the idea of credible visions and the practical nature of time frames of 20 to 30 years into the future, many entries, perhaps more than half, were complete flights of fancy, often belonging in the realm of "eco-fantasy." Some of these were undoubtedly interesting scenarios of far distant futures, or just strong images of the unreal contrived to expand the limits of the imaginable. But too many were only shallow abstractions of the nature of the city and life in general, where a vague notion of ecology seemed to matter much more than urban structure and design.

This is very meaningful because it indicates a rejection, or ignorance, of the idea of the city as a fundamentally cultural entity, as human and material concentration in contrast with nature. It means also that many competitors evaded the question of dealing with the city's specific problems in design terms. Maybe part of this vacuum was indirectly caused by one of the few questionable assumptions of the program, that the proposals for Milwaukee could be applicable to other similar cities. As it turned out, the best projects made very particular proposals for specific sites in Milwaukee. Their applicability to sites other cities is valid only at the level of general principles and concepts.

Suburban sprawl was a basic concern that was countered with the need for effective containment; therefore, the process of urbanization of the urban edge was transformed in proposals for new types of suburban housing integrated with new industry and agriculture and by the use of the fringe for parks, recreation and environmental management.

The problem of regenerating old neighborhoods produced many interesting ideas and was the theme most successfully developed by the majority. Most competitors seized the opportunity to reuse Lincoln Creek, the railway lines and the old industrial land. The proposals included the creation of a large park, the use of the river to create a lake and ponds and the treatment of the waterfront as a very valuable element in itself. The social and economic fabric of the neighborhood was strengthened by the creation of new industrial uses and jobs in vacant industrial sites; the introduction of local shops, market and schools; and generally, the creation of new neighborhood places.

The revitalization of the city center was dealt with rather loosely. The stronger ideas were for the use and design of the river front, the rediscovery of downtown housing and the need to strengthen the axis along Wisconsin Avenue between the river and the lake. But there were only two or three projects that understood clearly the need to link the heart of downtown with the edge of the lake.

In general, there seems to be a lack of understanding for the need for civic or ceremonial spaces, for monuments, for well-defined places. Maybe it's not in the culture anymore.

It is difficult to judge if interdisciplinary approaches contribute to the substance of submissions, since the identity of the competitors remained unknown to the jurors. But in the end substance is a product of strong minds, interdisciplinary or not.

The insights that arise through design, particularly through competitions such as this, must enter public discussion and policy. To do this we need to make these issues part of public education; we must invite and commit the politicians and officials (they were absent from this competition); and we must convince them and the community to get some of these proposals actually built, as examples.

If we judge the state of the art in city design based on this competition, it is fair to say that the state is delicate. There is a lot of fanciful escape from the problem. On the other hand, the works of quality are not opening new frontiers into the next century. They are returning to classic principles of design, to the basic forms of urban life that seem to work well time after time.

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