Temperament, Consensus and Collaboration

Raymond L. Gindroz, FAIA

Carefully chosen and placed rocks from Northern California provide a naturalistic refuge within the architectural compositions. Photos: Raymond L. Gindroz, FAIA

At its fall, 1999, forum in Los Angeles, the AIA Committee on Design was fortunate to observe several collaborations among remarkable groups of talented professionals. Each collaboration had its own personality. The presentations, especially the tone of the discussions and the body language of the participants, provided insight into the ingredients needed for successful collaborations.

The Getty Center

The designers for the Getty Center were relaxed and reminisced with good humor about some difficult moments in their collaboration. The complex was clearly improved by the balance they found among different personalities and goals.

All of the members had strong ideas about their specific areas of expertise, but they seemed to have been willing to resolve conflicts in creative ways (at least as described in this polite retrospective discussion). For example, Richard Meier, FAIA, and his firm established a hierarchy of form and space that unifies the complex. Although

recognizable as the firm's style, the building was rendered in softly colored panels and travertine, instead of stark white. This compromise not only appeased neighbors but also created a complex that is comfortable in its natural setting. The landscape designs of Laurie Olin, Hon. AIA, and Robert Irwin enrich the architecture. The contrast between the formal vocabulary of the buildings and the landscape results in a rich variety of highly individual spaces.
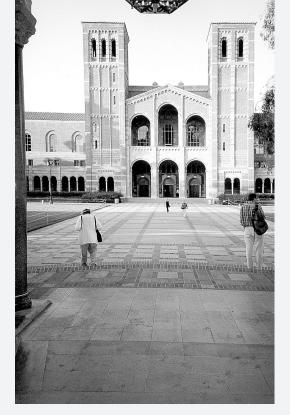
The interiors include period rooms that provide an even stronger contrast with the exterior architecture. We are accustomed to museums, especially in Europe, that install Modernist interiors within historic buildings. The Getty is an inside-out version of this: a Modernist exterior and circulation spaces connecting traditional interiors. As we move through the buildings, the contrast between these spaces create a memorable experience. The flow of different ideas and forms in the experience was very much like the flow of conversation among the panelists. There was consensus on the big picture and differences were among the parts and pieces.

The Getty Center appears to have become a successful public space for Los Angeles. By late morning it was crowded with people from all walks of life—sitting in the cafes, walking in the gardens, admiring the fountains, going through the galleries. There were an astonishing number of people in wheelchairs, visiting with family and friends. It is a truly civic—even populist—place, surprising for a program not usually thought of as populist. The collaboration apparently found a balance that is convincing to a large audience.

Landscape forms and
building forms at the edges
of the gardens

Top: The Architectural legacy of UCLA's campus has inspired and guided a series of new buildings, building restorations and campus spaces.
Photo: Ray Gindroz

Bottom: Powell Library addition and renovation
Photo: Timothy Hursley

University of California, Los Angeles

A similar mix of consensus and differences was evident in the discussion about the University of California, Los Angeles, campus. Three celebrated and accomplished architects presented very different approaches to individual buildings. But common to all of them was a shared understanding and deep respect for the campus itself. They each spoke about the tradition of space-making in the original campus plan that had been violated in postwar buildings.

Each speaker described his own efforts to re-connect the fabric of the campus with both archi-tecture and public space: Barton Phelps, FAIA, on his restoration and re-use of a landmark audito-rium building (Royce Hall) and his expansion of the University Elementary School; Buzz Yudell, FAIA, on two complexes (Powell Library and the law school library) that involved both restoration and new construction; Robert Venturi, FAIA, on the MacDonald and Gonda Medical Research Laboratories, which have a remarkable common space between them.

The strong leadership demonstrated by Duke Oakley, FAIA, who served as campus architect for many years, was clearly a key ingredient in this successful collaboration. Guided by him, the architects worked within a shared understanding of the image and form of the campus, based on its history and traditions. The spirit and tone of the conversation reflected this common ground between strong-willed individuals even though the projects were not done at the same time, and therefore there could not have been influenced by direct, face-to-face collaboration.

Grand Avenue

In contrast, the group designing buildings along Grand Avenue presented a collection of fas-cinating buildings, but without a clear sense of how the buildings fit together. The collaboration seemed to be happening for the first time on the

stage. Norman Pfeiffer, FAIA, very graciously ended with a presentation of a creative approach by Douglas Suisman, FAIA, for transforming the vast emptiness of Grand Avenue into an urban space by attempting to build an urban place in the median. But it was not clear how all of the buildings would contribute to that urban space.

It seemed that in spite of both words and intentions, the presentations offered no clear image of what an urban street in downtown Los Angeles should be (we were left to speculate what the Downtown Strategic Plan may have said on the matter, and to what result). And though there were many strong opinions about what such a street should not be, many of these, ironically, sounded just like the vital commercial streets around the City Market just two blocks away. With the lack of an overriding vision for the whole within which individual efforts find their place, collaboration—and even urbanism—seem elusive, if not impossible.

Walt Disney Imagineering Company, Universal Studios

Although carefully organized, our time at Disney was informal and relaxed. The Imagineers, who were working on various theme park attractions, simply opened up their workshop. In small groups, we went from area to area within the complex. Although we met with individuals one at a time as they presented their current work, it was clear that they knew and understood what each other were doing. We found a loosely structured organization of creative people who seemed to be able to define their roles as the projects evolved, but within a clear set of goals. It seemed more like a research facility or a collective artist studio than a corporate production team.

In contrast, Universal Studios put on a show. On stage were a group of talented and creative professionals presenting their own work. It was

not clear that they had ever met before, let alone worked together.

The unifying vision as presented by the CEO was indeed a troubling one: A video with a mix of sentimental images alternating with scenes of extraordinary violence from Universal's films. This was then described as the "Wow" that somehow informed the architecture of the entertainment facilities and urban centers being designed. It was not clear how images of violence can create an urbanism that will attract people back to the city, when for so many years the word "urban" has been a much-feared symbol of violence. Even within this vision there seemed to be little evidence of real collaboration—rather competition.

Lessons

Some core principles for collaboration emerged in the course of this meeting: first and foremost, working together in an open and creative atmosphere that permits the free exchange of ideas; second, clearly defined roles for each participant; third, shared values and a overall vision for the effort. Finally, one must always maintain a sense of humor about oneself.

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