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# Penang's Shophouse Culture

*Patricia Tusa Fels*

The appearance of many Southeast Asian cities has changed dramatically in the last 20 years, reflecting the region's rapid economic transformation. The size and population of these cities have expanded at a rate unknown in Western cities, and there has been little time to consider existing structures and their possible reuse. International businesses and eager governments are busy replacing indigenous architecture and thus sweeping away the rich life of the street — the traditional marketplace of the people.

Consequently, few Southeast Asian cities show recognizable signs of eighteenth-, nineteenth- or even early twentieth-century buildings, except for isolated palaces, temples and colonial buildings. Hong Kong and Bangkok have been almost completely rebuilt in the image of modern international finance and business centers. Singapore, which once possessed a visual history of migration, seasonal celebrations and cross-cultural relations, is now characterized by the near anonymity prevalent in cities around the world.

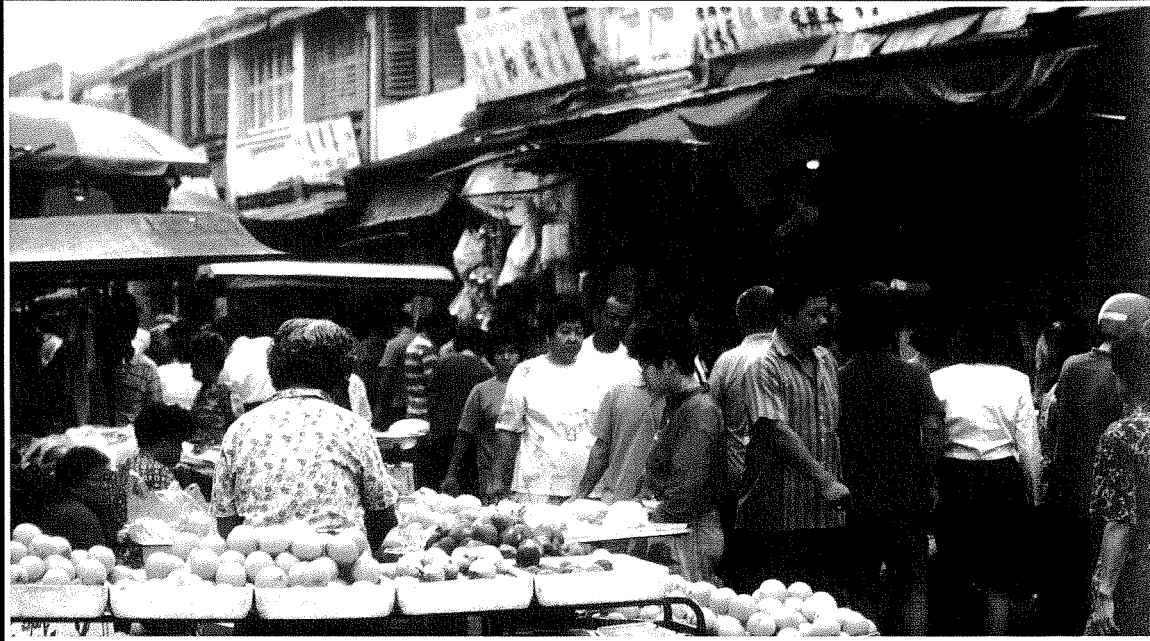
But tucked away off the west coast of Malaysia and moving at its own pace is Penang Island. Although the island is home to Penang, one of Malaysia's oldest cities, its role has been secondary to that of Kuala Lumpur, the capital, for the past 50 years. Yet the city is not a backwater; the urban area has a population of more than 500,000, a vibrant economy and a well-educated and prosperous citizenry. It is the bustling hub for an area that includes the mainland portion of Penang State (another 500,000 citizens) and the entire northwest region of Malaysia.

Much of Penang's business is still conducted in the traditional buildings of a tropical Southeast Asian city — buildings that date from a time when

A typical roovescape  
in the shophouse district  
of Penang.



The Campbell Street  
Market, where fresh veg-  
etables, fruit, fish and  
meat are sold daily. Most  
stands are set up in the  
morning and disappear by  
noon. At night the area is  
transformed into a hawk-  
er center, with carts sell-  
ing prepared food, and  
each hawker setting out  
tables and stools.



Tiled pattern and carved  
wooden doors are repre-  
sentative of decoration  
found on shophouses and  
of the continuation of the  
crafts of yesterday.





Map by Rahul Aggrawal.

local climate and customs influenced design. In Penang, the dominant form is the shophouse, a two- or three-story building with a “five-foot way” in front that provides an open arcade and sheltered walkway. Cafes and stores spill out to the streets, which are filled with the activity created by a plethora of open markets, mobile food hawkers, workshops and small stores.

Penang’s shophouses are repositories of stories, reflecting people’s tastes, needs, lives, hopes and dreams. They are integral to a way of life in which small-scale workplaces, shops and residences are located near (sometimes even above or behind) each other, and they comprise an image unique to Southeast Asia. The historic shophouse landscape is threatened by many forces, including the successful Asian economy (which was, ironically, nurtured by this shophouse environment). Taken as a whole, these neighborhoods offer intriguing lessons for how conservation can be coupled with economic and social stability.

### The Shophouses of Penang

George Town was the original settlement on the island, and this historic core still serves as the city center. Founded by Francis Light in 1786 for the British East India Company, George Town was a trade center from the very beginning. Light, an English naval officer and trader, laid out the town in typical colonial rectangular blocks with 30- to 40-foot-wide streets, but this grid was never expanded. The city grew along radial arms

Two of the streets laid out by Francis Light. The depth of the shophouses allows for a series of light wells and courtyards.

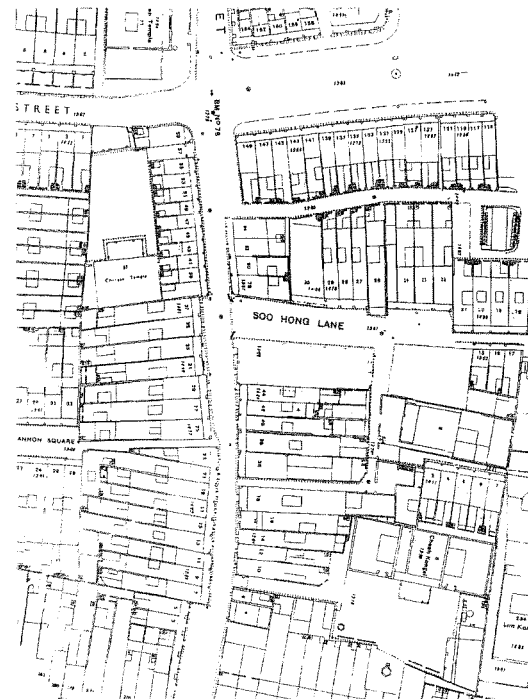


that reached out to the grand spice (pepper, nutmeg and clove) and fruit plantations. Intermediate parcels evolved into a series of alleys and lanes densely packed with houses.

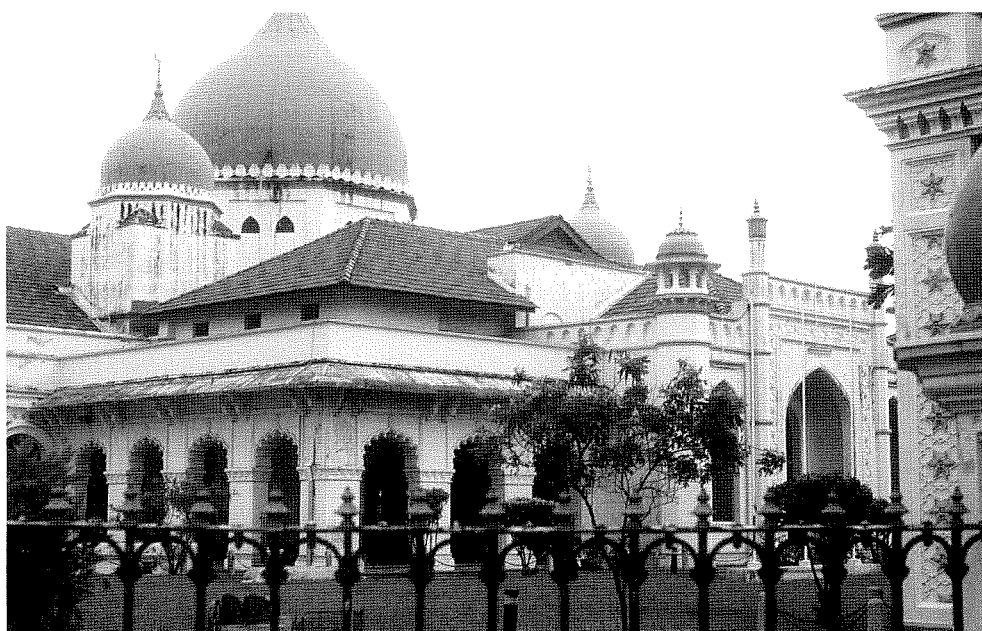
The city's port activities have always attracted a wide mix of people. In 1794 Light listed the settlers in the new town: Chinese, Chulias (Southern Indians), native Malays (from Sumatra, Java and the Malay peninsula), Siamese and Burmans, Arabs, Buggesses (from Celebes) and Europeans; today a similar ethnic cross-section exists. The city's economy continues to be based on trade, although its commerce is now dominated by electronics and textiles, rather than rubber, tin and spices. Much of this commerce operates out of the old shophouses of George Town.

Shophouses have been built in Penang for 200 years. This unique type of structure clearly shows the influence of Chinese, Malay, Indian and European styles, merged and matured in response to the local environment. From the Chinese came the courtyard plan, the rounded gable ends and the fan-shaped air vents; from the Malay came the carved timber panels and the timber fretwork; from the Indians, urban construction techniques, including a hard-wearing plaster; from the Europeans, French windows and decorative plasterwork. The tropical climate dictated a need for shelter from the sun and the rains; thus evolved the continuous, covered walkway or *kaki-lima* (literally "five foot," although many are wider). As the city prospered, styles became more ornate, and a group of artisans developed. The fruits of their labor — created in wood, stone, tile and plaster — can be seen everywhere.

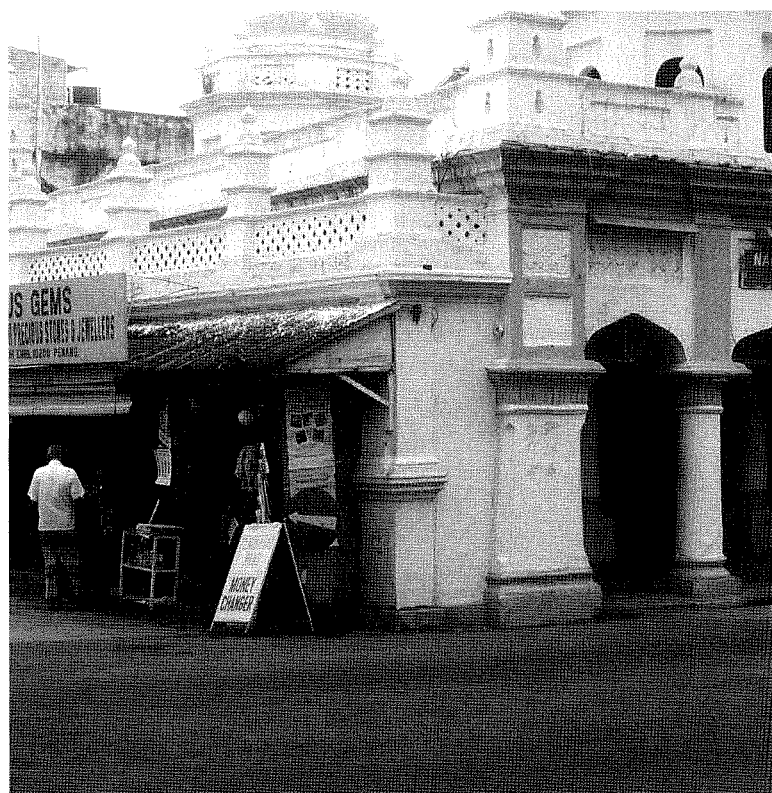
The culture of the settlers can be found in shophouses. Structures still exist where spice auctions were once held, where Dr. Sun Yat Sen hid out before he helped create the



Map and plan of part of shophouse district.



Kapitan Kling Mosque, built by the first Indian Muslims in the early 1800s and continually added on to over the years, speaks of Penang's historic cultural diversity.

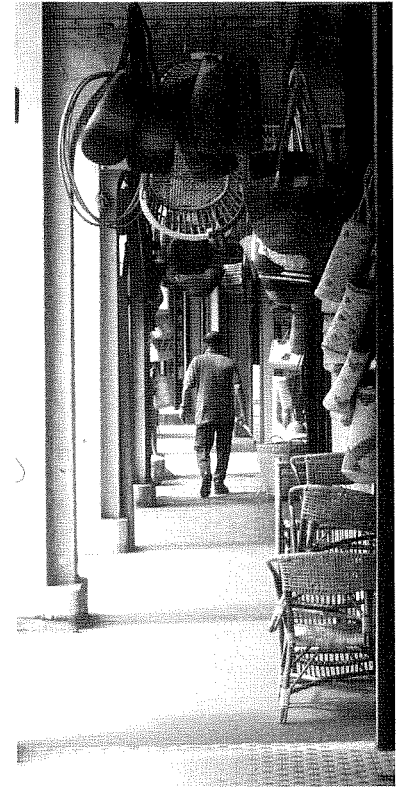


Left to right: Typical shophouses; a Muslim shrine among the shophouses with hole-in-the-wall shops built into one side; the five-foot way acts as a transition zone between street and building; a shop displaying its goods in the five-foot way.

Chinese Republic or where pilgrims lodged before going to Mecca. Shophouses were residences of wealthy Chinese merchants and repositories for trade from Sumatra, Arabia and China in spices, cloth, opium and bird nests. Variations on the shophouse serve as Chinese clan houses.

Streets were known by the trades they housed; there were centers for activities like fish selling, tinsmithing and stone cutting. Many of these activities continue on the same streets in the old shophouses; many of the ethnic traders remain in premises occupied by their forefathers. Shophouse neighborhoods still center around mosques or clan temples built one hundred years ago. Here can be found the stories of immigration, economic success and accommodation among diverse cultures.

Although detached structures exist in George Town, 85 percent of the buildings are either shophouses or their purely residential form, the terrace house. That this large stock of functioning nineteenth- and early twentieth-century buildings still exists is noteworthy. Even more remarkable is how these buildings, standing together, create an outstanding urban form.



Street after street of two- and three-story shophouses generate a profusion of complimentary architectural elements. Today's business is displayed through a medley of signs while the facades present the crafts of yesterday — carved wooden doors, intricate tiled patterns, ornate grillwork and elegant plaster decorations.

The pedestrian scale endures — the shophouse widths of 14 to 20 feet provide a comforting rhythm of changing columns, arches and materials. Walking down the street one perceives the latitude, feeling the variations in light and temperature from the cool covered walkway to the hot street.

Characteristically, the shophouse has a shop on the bottom floor and a residence above, the top floor extending out over a covered veranda/walkway at street level. The narrowness of the building maximizes the number of shopfronts on the street, while the elongated shape yields a series of interior courtyards. Since all the buildings are attached, a continuous arcade is created along the street.

With the expansion of the city new types of buildings appeared, but shophouses continue to be built, and residential

and commercial uses continue to coexist. Penang has been spared the rigid segregation of uses common in places where Western zoning predominates. Throughout the city, workshops, stores and homes share the same streets.

The shophouse combination of business and home has allowed for trade to continue without incurring many of the costs of doing business today. With the owner always nearby, security is not a problem, hours can be flexible, child care is in-house, the workforce can be expanded with family members when required, and food and drink are always close at hand. Not surprisingly, a 1980 survey revealed that 47 percent of Penang's commercial activity, and over half of small-scale manufacturing, is located in pre-war shophouses.

#### **Threats to the Vernacular Landscape**

But the shophouses and the rich street life they have helped create are endangered in Penang, for a number of reasons.

Rent control, in effect since 1948, provides landlords with no incentives to maintain their buildings. Many owners are

waiting for their shophouses to fall down so they can build new five-story shophouses (the limit under present regulations).

Large-scale urban redevelopment, bringing with it the modern business center, poses another danger. Development pressures continue to grow in Penang as prosperity expands; so far, development has meant demolition and not renewal of the existing shophouse neighborhoods. The country's campaign to clean up the cities has favored demolition, missing the opportunity to celebrate existing vernacular architecture.

One project, Komtar, sponsored by the state government, required the destruction of a large area of shophouses. The original rationale was that Komtar would solve the demand for new commercial space, thus leaving the remainder of George Town intact. But the 65-story building sits in stark contrast with its surroundings, a self-contained, erect fortress with no link to the life of the street, a model that purports that architecture should be the same everywhere, disregarding any specific sense of place. City and state governments have located offices there to utilize the space. No figures are available for the ongoing cost to the city or state, but the question certainly arises as to whether a renewal and expansion of existing structures might not have proven less costly and resulted in a more innovative city center.

There has been little recognition of the inherent value of the shophouses, which have served the city as warehouse, home, workshop, store and office. While the workability of the shophouse form is proven daily by the construction of modern shophouses (bland concrete copies), there has been little effort to maintain the existing stock. Yet shophouses can be modernized easily; their open, simple structure simplifies installation of utilities and facilitates change (houses along a row can be combined for expansion and individual units seldom have interior obstructions).

Local leaders speak highly of conservation and heritage, but the only renovation projects ever completed have been of the old colonial administration buildings; sensitive remodels of shophouses are few, with most owners replacing wooden shutters with aluminum windows, decorative plasterwork with smooth stucco, and tile roofs with asbestos sheets.

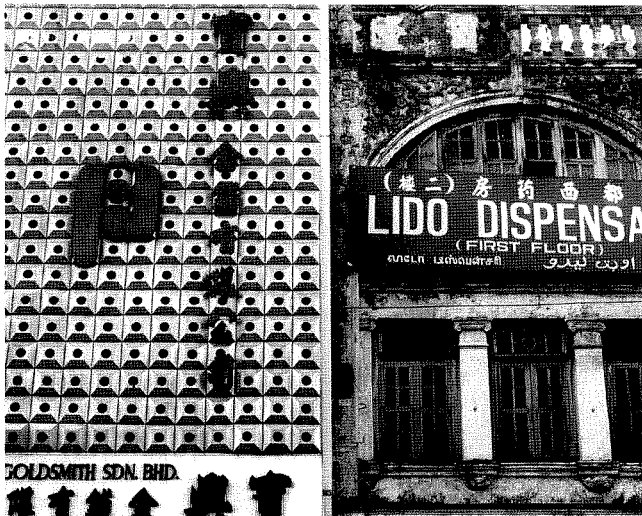
Future city plans include conservation areas, but no incentives to private owners exist; only one model renovation project involving a house has been set up (by the city with assistance from the French government). Moreover, the conservation areas are small in size compared to the actual areas of architectural significance. City and state officials are timid in legislating restrictions for fear of arousing the opposition of developers and landowners.

The idea that conservation must be associated with architectural significance seems to be a major stumbling block. The



Komtar, in stark contrast with its surroundings, and an abandoned shophouse.





Above: Five-story shophouse replacements rarely try to reflect existing architecture. Right: Behind such modern false facades the old shophouse awaits rediscovery.



history, urban form and ongoing vitality of the city are based on the way that its many individual structures continue to function together. The value of the whole greatly outweighs the importance of individual components.

When an owner characterizes his shophouse as rundown, modified over time with various elements like jalousies and aluminum front, it is hard to argue about architectural significance. However, if he pulls down his shophouse and his neighbors follow suit, the rich mix of arched and louvered openings, the fine craftsmanship, and the active street life might never be seen again in Penang. The holes that develop affect not only the unity of this magnificent streetscape, but also the economic and social welfare of the local population.

There are people in Penang who appreciate the value of the unique George Town streetscape. Some are interested in developing the heritage tourism opportunities that historic cities offer, some have positions of power in the city and state governments, some have influence through the media. But their numbers are small and their goals diverse, and they have trouble rousing broad public attention.

Meanwhile, the majority of Penangites carry out their business in the streets, looking infrequently at the city's architecture or urban form. On a subconscious level, their memories may be jogged by the sensory qualities of the street, and they may recognize a comforting familiarity to the daily routine and physical characteristics of George Town. But many people speak only of the open drains, crowded walkways (often taken over by motorbikes) and crumbling plaster.

### Conservation Possibilities

George Town's unique shophouses and vibrant streets await their fate. In one sense there is hope, because everything moves slowly in Penang. Complex property ownership patterns in George Town offer some protection against private large-scale development. But the weather will not change. The humidity, heat and rain will continue to inflict damage on the shophouses. The streets will stay alive only as long as businesses thrive and customers come.

Innovative ways must be found to restore occupied buildings for existing tenants and to instigate new uses for vacant properties; while many residents want to maintain links with the past, few want to live in a museum or a shophouse theme park. At the same time, basic infrastructure (water, sewers and roads) must be maintained and improved to insure that population (young and old) and businesses remain in George Town.

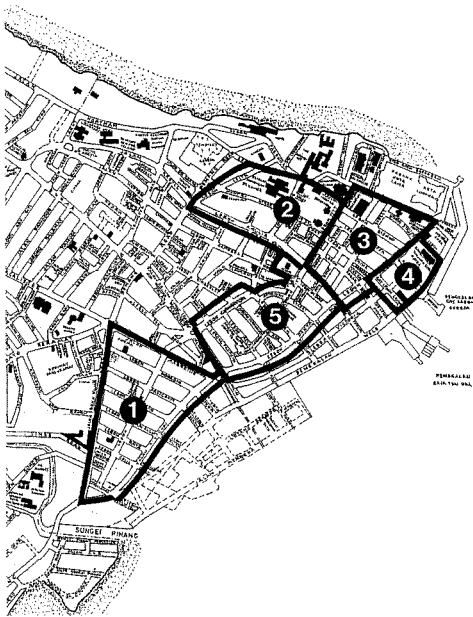
Politicians often state that Malaysia is a developing country; thus, before tackling conservation they must first deal with employment and housing. But these issues can not be separated from each other: It is in the inner city of George Town where much of the employment of Penang exists, and it is in the inner city where many of the low-income earners reside. Even in the poorest neighborhoods, 76 percent of the residents prefer to stay where they are and 82 percent stated in a recent survey that their neighborhood was safe.

Although many people speak of increasing economic opportunities, one need only look at industrialized nations with their countless unemployed and homeless to conclude that there will



Above: Eating on the street in "parking spaces."

Below: The historic shophouse district.



always be a need, no matter how developed a nation is, for marginal small businesses. A variety of trades, stores and people must be sustained. In George Town, basketmakers, tinsmiths, spice shop merchants and noodle-makers are all at work; many proprietors are low-income and run marginal business, but they are housed and employed, their pride intact.

George Town's shophouses offer opportunities for growth; they have provided the nursery for many of Penang's successful businesses. Similarly, what has been termed the "bazaar economy," the indigenous economic activity and the streets and surroundings in which it functions, should be seen as an ongoing and valuable component of Southeast Asian cities. Bazaars provide many people with their first business opportunities.

The city of Penang has taken a tentative first step towards maintaining its shophouse culture by establishing conservation guidelines and completing an inventory of heritage buildings for the inner city, an area of 1.5 square kilometers with a population of 32,000. This work will record the variety of buildings, their unique characteristics and their contribution to the streetscape, and it will set standards for renovations.

In an effort to increase awareness of the local resources, the Penang Heritage Trust was formed in 1987. This organization has now joined with similar groups in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Jakarta to form a Southeast Asian network of conservation groups. They have begun the process of focusing the eyes of local government on conservation potential.

But additional action will be required. The tax code could be amended to include incentives for renovating properties and to recognize the historical value of all pre-1940 structures in the inner city. This would reduce the tedious work of rating the historical value of individual buildings and the interminable haggles with property owners who want special exceptions. Although rent control cannot be simply abandoned (it sustains house and shop for many low-income people), few low-income tenants need their rents frozen at 1950 levels.

The real issue is finding ways to insure the maintenance of structures and services. For example, rent control could be lifted for any property that is renovated. A portion of state low-income housing funds could be spent for restoration, instead of building new units. Maintenance programs could instill an awareness that clean buildings are not necessarily new buildings.

Tourism, which the state government encourages in the historic center, could provide jobs and income for the city without supplanting its current economic and social life. Penang could champion its wealth of cafes, vibrant street life, markets, temples and variety of small hotels. Tourists would observe the city's vibrant life, not a dead shell.

The inevitable conflict between tourist economy and local economy could be avoided by banning large-scale development and by insuring that a certain percentage of low-income properties remain. A strong local population base would insure that the business of making things and providing services is not overrun by the selling of tourist trinkets. There is a difference between restoring one block for the look of how things used to be and the idea of maintaining an entire area's social and economic texture.

### **Towards a Southeast Asian Aesthetic**

Penang today is awash in clutter, a sheer profusion of things, reflecting a contented but disorderly life force. The Western-trained Malaysian planner (the majority of architects and planners were educated in the West) knows his country but has been taught to clean up clutter, to organize.

Acknowledging a Southeast Asian aesthetic implies acceptance of and sensitivity to the natural confusion of the streetscape. Indeed, decay, disorderliness and complexity can be of value. The typical streetfront displays an eclectic mixing of styles, with a healthy lack of purism. The styles derive from the history of Southeast Asia as a trading center, overrun by waves of immigrants, colonialists and traders. All have left their marks which have been integrated into the local vernacular, with an un-self conscious manner.

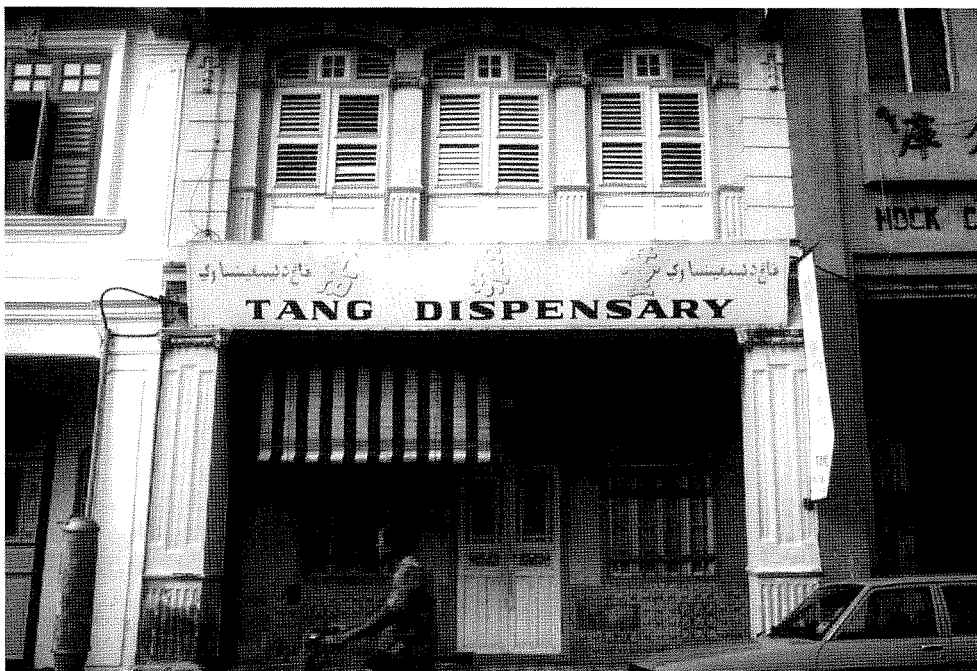
The street collage that until recently characterized all Southeast Asian cities was an ongoing creation. New building design can only be part of this process if value is given to what

exists, with new structures not dominating the streetfront but maintaining the existing sense of scale and the extroverted life of the street.

The shophouse culture of Penang is more than just buildings, and conserving that culture involves going beyond traditional building preservation. The approach must combine social, economic and cultural health with building conservation. Some European cities have been very successful in "integral conservation," where the health of neighborhood and buildings are equal goals. A more Asian solution would combine individual flexibility and entrepreneurship with an overall agreement on neighborhood stability.

Penang is a city too rich in history, visual surprises and lively streets to be allowed to be buried by concrete skyscrapers. Considering that so much visual evidence of history and indigenous architecture has been lost throughout in Southeast Asia, Penang offers a unique opportunity to maintain part of the region's cultural wealth. Conservation efforts here could serve as a model for newly developing areas, such as Cambodia and Vietnam, where areas of heritage architecture still remain.

Is it necessary that Southeast Asian cities be rebuilt for these countries to join the twenty-first century? Certainly, in Penang history can continue to be made in existing streetscapes and buildings, indeed, the old can become a part of the future.



Most shophouse facades date from the 1890s to the 1930s.

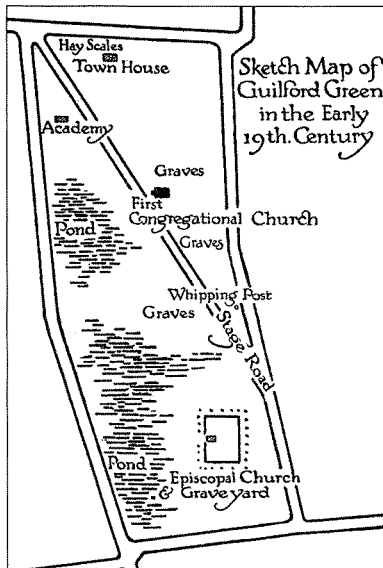
# The Guilford Green

*Nona Bloomer*

New England town greens are a classic American image and the quintessential expression of a regional vernacular landscape tradition. From their earliest beginnings they have provided a central place for public gatherings, ceremonial rituals and practical functions. While the specific uses of greens have evolved over the years as the needs and values of their communities have changed, the role of greens as places of gathering, individual repose and central importance for towns has endured.

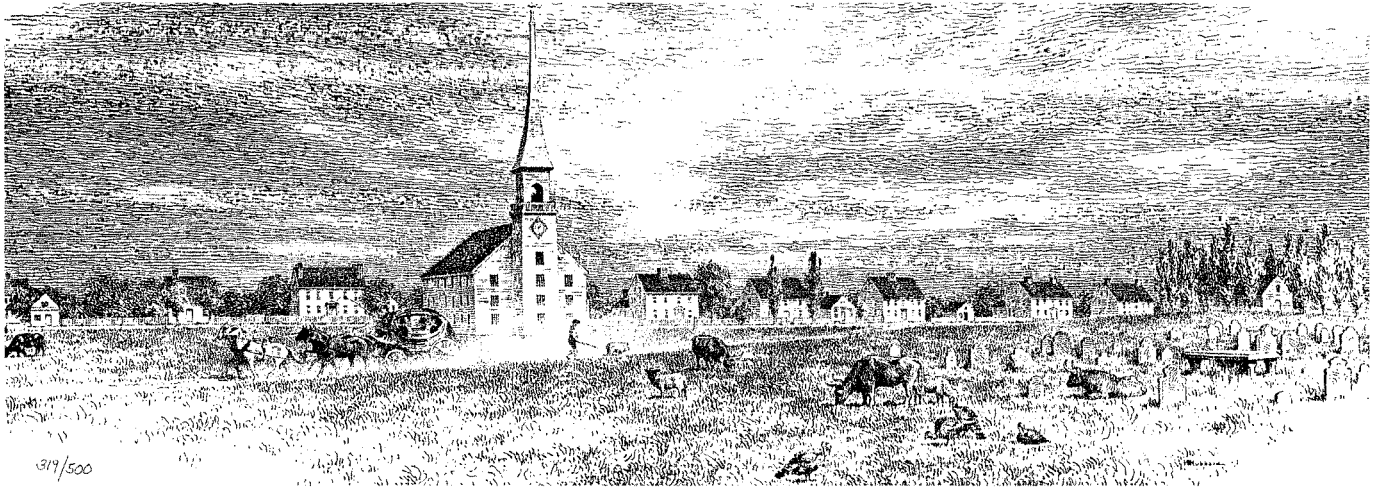
Many greens, however, have been encroached upon or fragmented beyond recognition. As development continues to threaten their existence, it becomes increasingly important not only to work for their protection but also to examine their historic and cultural roles and the unique contributions they make to the quality of life in a town.

The evolution of the green in Guilford, Connecticut, exemplifies the marvelous flexibility of this open space. In its early days it was used as a communal ground for grazing cattle, burying the dead and drilling the militia; it contained a saw pit, a whipping post, a gravel pit, hay scales, churches, schools and the town hall. Today it is a parklike setting that accommodates high school graduations, seasonal celebrations and town parades. For more than three and a half centuries, the Guilford Green has adapted to changing spiritual and societal patterns while retaining its role as a center for the town.



Above: Drawing by Charles Hubbard.  
 Courtesy Guilford Free Library.  
 Opposite page: Aerial view of  
 Guilford Green, 1981.  
 By Joel Helander.





Sketch of Guilford Green in the nineteenth century.

Drawing by Charles Hubbard. Courtesy Guilford Free Library.

### An "All-Purpose Utility," 1639-1814

Guilford was settled in 1639 by a small company of landed gentry and yeoman farmers from the rural counties of Sussex, Kent and Surrey, England. After purchasing land from the Native Americans, they settled on a fertile plain lying between two rivers that run to the Connecticut shore of the Long Island Sound.

Following the general practice of Puritan communities providing common grazing lands, Guilford planners set aside a communal ground of sixteen acres, around which they distributed their home lots. Although the nine-square plan of nearby New Haven, where the settlers spent their first few months in the New World, may have inspired their orderly plan, Guilford's central space differed from New Haven's in size, shape and appellation. It was smaller, more rectangular and, from the beginning, called "The Greene."<sup>1</sup> New Haven's central square, by contrast, carried the name "Market Place," reflecting the mercantile cast of its urban London founders.

The green, surrounded by privately owned land, functioned, in the words of architectural historian Elizabeth Mills Brown, as an "all-purpose public utility"<sup>2</sup> — serving as a drill field, cemetery and grazing ground. The green was unoccupied by buildings for the first four years of its existence, until Guilford Colony combined with New Haven Colony for mutual protection against the Dutch, French and Native Americans. Because New Haven's theocratic government

restricted voting privileges to church members, a church had to be established quickly. In colonial New England communities it was standard practice to locate the church on the green, and in Guilford a Congregational "Meeting House" (a term expressing the use of the building for town meetings as well as for religious purposes) was constructed on the northwest end of the green in 1643.

Concern for the green was recorded as early as 1646, when cutting down trees in front of the meeting house was forbidden.<sup>3</sup> But the green was not yet sacred, and it eventually lost some of its turf. In 1670, when the town needed a blacksmith, the town leaders sliced off land from the south side to offer as a home lot. Unfortunately he did not stay, and in 1676 they took a second slice from the east side for another blacksmith. These excisions cost the green four of its original 16 acres. Its shape was still rectangular, but the town inherited clumsy jogs in the streets that now adjoin the southwest and northeast corners.

In this early period there were no streets around the green; the entire space was regarded as a public passageway. An official survey taken in 1729 measured the area of the green to be twelve acres (today, the grassy part within the street curb is only eight acres). The survey signaled the pressure for development and the importance of the green as a thoroughfare and multi-use space, and it protected the green from further subdivision:

to accommodate the Several Lanes that Center in Sd Green to pass from one Lane to the other as well to the meeting House burying place School House: and being the usual & necessary place of Parade for the Train bands [militia] we find the whole of sd Green is necessary for highway, for the use aforesd and will not admit of any Lands to be there Laid out to any person as fifth Division or otherways without prejudicing of highway, and thereupon we have set out & Stated the Whole of Sd Green for highways.<sup>4</sup>

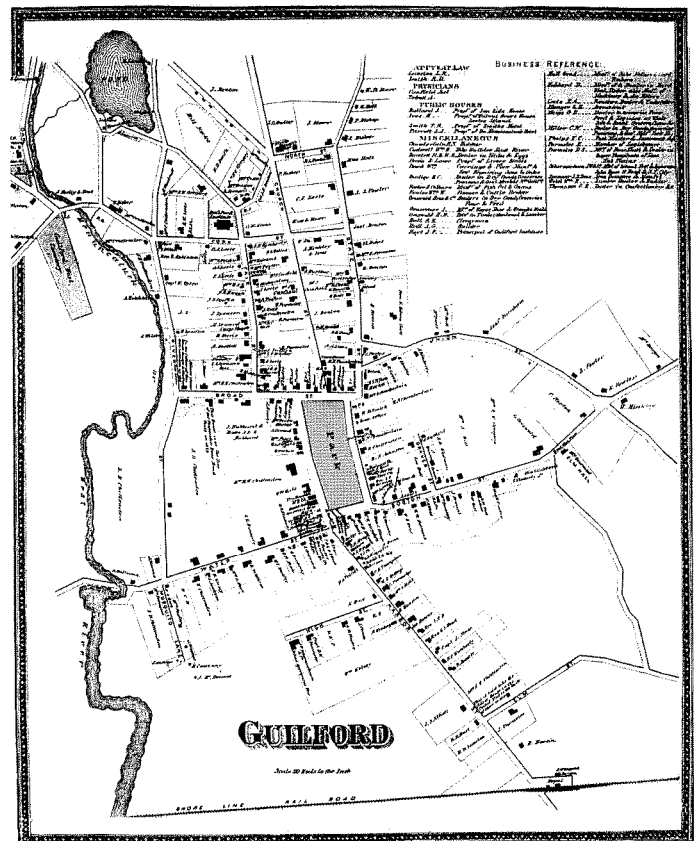
By the beginning of the eighteenth century Guilford and New Haven colonies were under the jurisdiction of Connecticut Colony, and church membership was no longer a requirement for voting at town meetings. As life became increasingly secularized, two more institutions appeared on the green, one reflecting the prevailing spirit of religious tolerance and the other a practical need for a non-denominational meeting place “for the purpose of transacting the public business of the town.”<sup>5</sup> In 1750 a small Episcopal church was built on the southeastern end, and in 1775 a two-story clapboard “town house,” the ancestor of today’s town hall, was constructed on the northern end. This building also served a commercial purpose, as the lower floor was regularly leased as a store.

Although Guilford prospered comfortably in the eighteenth century, the green remained somewhat disheveled. It was “an unkempt area of public land,” far from level, with pond holes and a gravel pit. “There were no trees, no walks, no fence and disorder prevailed. Here, for nearly two centuries, the townspeople had pastured their domestic animals.”<sup>6</sup> They had been burying their dead also, as noted by Timothy Dwight who travelled by in 1800:

*This square, like that in New Haven, is deformed by a burying ground, and to add to the deformity is unenclosed. The graves are therefore trampled upon and the monuments injured both by men and cattle. ... Nor is it unreasonable to suppose that the proximity of these sepulchral fields to human habitations is injurious to health. Some of them have, I believe, been found to be offensive and will probably be allowed to have been noxious.*<sup>7</sup>

The green was as cluttered above ground as it was crowded beneath, with four buildings inside it — two churches, a schoolhouse (called the Academy) and the Town House. Assorted farm animals were running loose, and paths crisscrossed in all directions.

By the time Dwight was writing the green was also open to more than local traffic. The southern section of the stagecoach mail route between New York and Boston passed through the green on a diagonal. A remembrance of the passage of the Boston Post Road remains in the name of Boston Street, which runs along the south side of the green.



Guilford town center, 1868. From *Beers Atlas of New Haven County, Connecticut*. Courtesy Guilford Free Library.

### Beautifying the Green, 1815-1873

The turning point in the life of Guilford's green came with the organization of the town borough in 1815. Inspired perhaps by New Haven's example of relocating its own central burying ground, or responding to Dwight's criticism, or sensing that the green should begin to serve different public needs, borough officials assumed the difficult task of beautifying the green. The warden and burgesses planted trees "for shade or ornament" in the "shadeless streets," restricted swine and geese from the "Publick Walks" and officially christened the green a "Publick Square."<sup>8</sup> This new designation suggests a social motive behind the transformation of the green, one that envisioned a reinterpretation of the use of the green as a public place.

Two new cemeteries were opened in 1817 and the green was no longer used for burials. By 1824 the gravestones were removed and the mounds denoting the graves were levelled. Horses could no longer be fastened to trees, and only cows that were registered with the borough clerk and wore straps bearing the owner's name were allowed about. But the vision of the borough officials extended beyond planting trees, relocating cemeteries and controlling animals; it called for making a thorough and clean sweep of the green.

The Congregational church, dissatisfied with the condition of its building and nudged by borough officials, decided to

relocate from inside the green to the edge. In 1829 it purchased a property across the street to the north and sold the house upon it. The house was carried away and construction then began on the imposing new edifice for Guilford's earliest ecclesiastical institution; the commanding presence of the church still dominates the green's central axis.

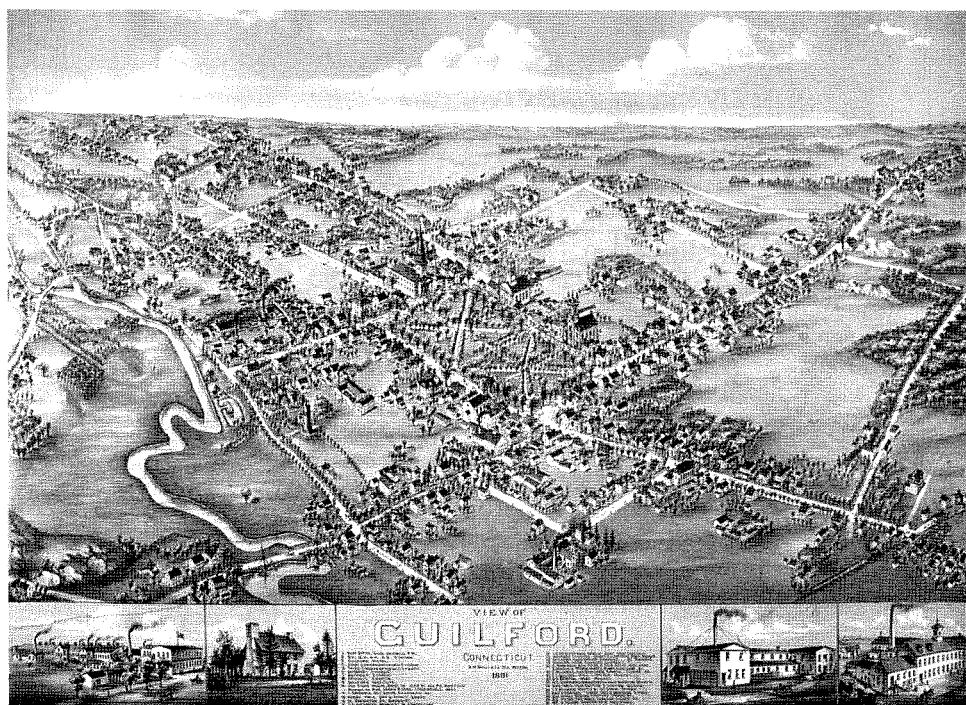
In 1830, after the Congregational church's old building on the green was razed, the Academy and the Town House were moved to properties on Church Street. This effort to purchase new properties, raze and move old buildings and construct new ones speaks highly of Yankee stamina and local financial support.

Only the Episcopal church remained standing on the green. The white rail fence that was constructed around the green left an opening to allow carriages access to that church until 1838, when a stone gothic building was completed on the east side of the green. The old church on the green was then dismantled and sold, and the railing could be closed.

Even then the green was not completely empty. An old-timer reminiscing on the appearance of the green in 1844 recalled: *The green of this period was used as a cow pasture, very convenient for the dwellers in the vicinity, and they strenuously opposed this privilege being taken from them and deemed it perverted taste to convert a useful cow pasture into an ornamental park, which is now the pride and glory of this old, historic town.*<sup>9</sup>

The cows were finally evicted in the 1860s.

Bird's-eye view of  
Guilford, 1881. O.H. Bailey  
& Co. Courtesy Guilford  
Free Library.







United Workers for Public Improvement at the Guilford Fair, 1897. Courtesy Guilford Free Library.

In 1868 the green was dignified with a new appellation, “park,” in the *Beers Atlas of New-Haven County*. The Guilford Agricultural Society also named it Guilford Park on the cover of its premium lists from the 1870s on. The word “park,” which is today part of the common vocabulary of public space, was relatively new at the time. For example, it first appeared as a topic in an American encyclopedia in 1863 when Frederick Law Olmsted (who had been schooled by North Guilford parsons and had his first farm in Guilford at Sachem’s Head, by the seashore) contributed an essay to *Appleton’s New American Cyclopaedia*. Mid-nineteenth-century parks were conceived as a relief from the evils of urban life, as pastoral landscapes and as “great pleasure grounds mean to be pieces of the country, with fresh air, meadows, lakes and sunshine right in the city.”<sup>10</sup>

The transformation of the green to what we consider a park today was very gradual. Without the benefit of being cropped by cows, the green in the latter part of the nineteenth century must have looked more like a country meadow than a manicured urban park. Crops of hay were raised on the green and sold to the highest bidder until 1894, when thrift finally gave way to aesthetics and the town purchased a horse-drawn lawn mower.

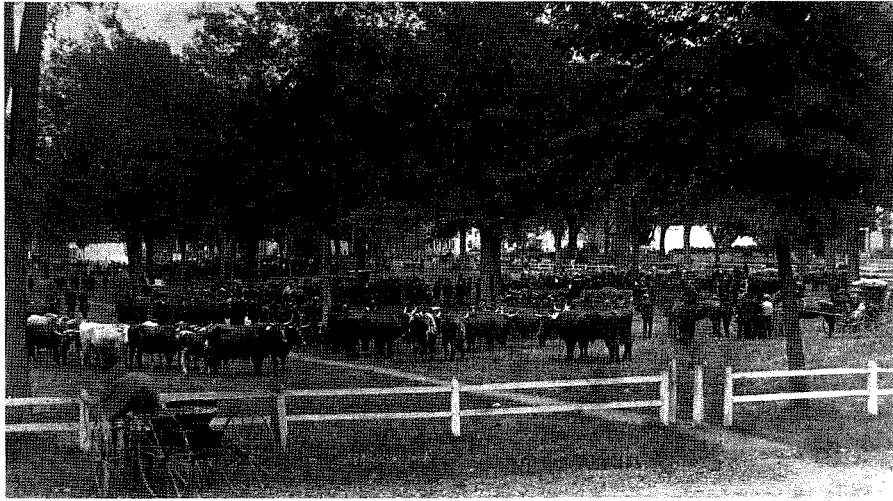
The new name did not stick, perhaps because the green never directly fulfilled the social role or physical form envisioned for parks. However, it remains in the name of Park Street, which runs along the east side of the green.

### The Village Improvement Society Makes its Mark, 1874-1931

The transformation of Guilford’s green speaks not only of the introduction of ideas about park space into the nineteenth-century town but also of the formation of village improvement societies, which sought to improve the residential character of towns. The concept began in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in 1853, spread throughout New England and became a national movement. Writer George Waring formulated the goals of these groups:

*to improve and ornament the streets and public grounds of the village by planting and cultivating trees, establishing and maintaining walks ... lighting the streets, encouraging the formation of a library and reading room, and generally doing whatever may tend to the improvement of the village as a place of residence.*<sup>11</sup>

In 1874 Guilford women organized themselves into their own exclusively feminine society, “The United Workers for Public Improvement.” They intended “to raise funds to repair the walks, light the streets, improve the condition of the green” and extend the work of beautifying and improving the village.<sup>12</sup> They had one hundred lampposts erected in the streets about the green and paid a man to keep them lighted. They encouraged the planting of trees and supervised the beautification of the green. They gathered each spring to rake the green, a rite heralded by the celebrative ringing of church bells and the shooting of the cannon.



Above: Cattle show on the green during the Guilford Fair in the 1890s. Courtesy Guilford Free Library.

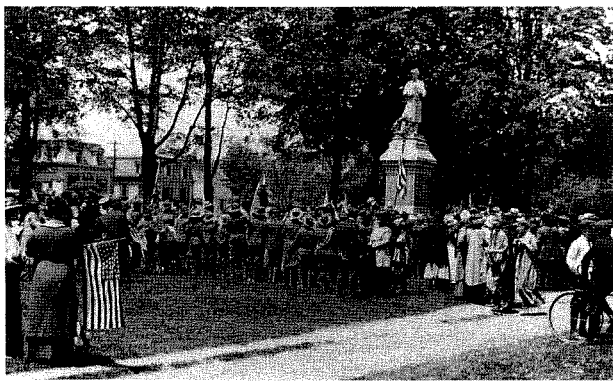
Right: For a time, the green was called a park, an appellation that did not last.

*Vale Business College*      THE OLDEST AND BEST  
 PREMIUM LIST  
 OF THE  
**Guilford Agricultural Society,**  
 FOR THEIR  
 THIRTY-SIXTH ANNUAL  
**CATTLE SHOW & FAIR,**  
 TO BE HELD  
**Wednesday, Sept. 30, 1896.**  
 GUILFORD PARK AND TOWN HALL,  
 GUILFORD, CONN.  
 If Stormy, Next Pleasant Day.  
 If You Want  
 Farm, Garden or Flower Seeds  
 Roots, Bulbs and Nursery Stock,  
 Go to  
**FRANK S. PLATT**  
 374 State St.  
  
 Flowers, Plants and Decorations,  
 Jardiniers, Flower Stands,  
 Plant Food and Florists' Supplies.  
**FRANK S. PLATT**  
 New Haven, Ct.  
SHORE LINE LITHO. PRINT, GUILFORD, CONN.

The local papers enjoyed reporting on this festive event: "Every day one may see some new thing under the sun if he keeps his eyes about him. On Saturday we saw something new, eighty ladies with eighty rakes freshening up Guilford Green." The women, dressed in big bonnets and ruffled headdresses, carried rakes patriotically decorated with red, white and blue streamers, while "the Guilford band played to cheer the workers on their way."<sup>13</sup>

Concerts, parades and sporting events were held on the green during this period. It was used for football and baseball games, lawn tennis, winter skating and evening promenading. Fire drills were demonstrated and election parades celebrated with the "booming of battery cannons." A bandstand was placed near the center, the dilapidated fence was removed and handsome granite curbing was installed along the edges of the green.

The green also assumed a memorial role. In 1877 the granite foundation for a Civil War monument was placed in the center of the green just above the old cemetery. Between 1903 and 1928 cement walks, contributed by townspeople in memory of loved ones, replaced the green's muddy paths. One reporter, however, disapproved: "Surely the common Green should be kept in character. Running loud white side-walks across it is like taking the ancient sunbonnet from a fine old country grandmother and substituting a forty-cent flapper beret."<sup>14</sup>



Civil War monument on the green. Courtesy Guilford Free Library.



Today the green is used for diverse activities, such as political gatherings, memorials and monuments, fairs ...  
Credits: Left, *Shore Line Times*; center, Mark Bloomer; right, Barbara Kleutsch.

With the advent of the First World War a new Liberty Flagpole and an honor roll appeared on the green. Trees were planted in memory of Guilford's war dead, and in 1931 a boulder for a permanent memorial was set into concrete. Since then five more monuments, four of them war memorials, have been placed on the green.

The United Workers for Public Improvement disbanded in 1931. Without the care of the women the green fell, once again, into a disheveled condition. Rossiter Snyder, Warden of the Borough, pleaded for contributions to revitalize and fertilize its greenery, acquire suitable benches and fund a "credible band" to play in the bandstand. He also recognized that the green performed an important symbolic role, in addition to its recreational and commemorative one. It was a "monument to the town" and a historic presence of national significance:

*The saving and beautifying of the Green means more to this town than any other public improvement at present. By the Green the town is known and remembered. It is starving to death and we want to revive it. The borough allotment for it will go only a limited distance. The Green is an inheritance of three hundred years and it must go on for that many more. It is a source of interest and pride beyond the limits of the town. Its value reaches the entire state, and the New England states, and, for that matter, the United States, for it is true that these old New England towns are the background, the foundation, the sources from which most of this nation grew. And we cannot let the foundation of our house crumble.*<sup>15</sup>

### The Guilford Green Today

Originally at the core of the settlement, Guilford's green is now geographically dislocated as a central place, not only regarding habitation, but also business. The straightening and relocation of the Boston Post Road in 1927 took the town's main commercial activity to a strip north of the village, leaving the area around the green for smaller businesses. The houses facing the green have been adapted for business uses and rental apartments, but residential streets lined with trees and fences fronting antique houses lead immediately off the streets around the green.

After the borough consolidated with the town, in 1941, responsibility for supervising the green passed to the Board of Selectmen. The selectmen have repeatedly affirmed its use as a public place for public assembly on condition that whoever is using the green take care of it.

The green today plays a ceremonial and celebrative role in the town, serving as a location for events from Memorial Day celebrations to Christmas tree festivities. It sustains a vivid public life for town residents, who attend graduations, concerts, festivals, strawberry socials, ecumenical gatherings and peace vigils there. The care and appearance of the green is a widely accepted community responsibility supported by several local organizations, although not always with complete agreement about what should go on the green or how the space should be used.



... the town's annual "strawberry social," quiet moments of relaxation and high school graduation ceremonies.  
Credits: Left and right, *Shore Line Times*; center, Mark Bloomer.

Before the hurricane of 1938 the green had so many trees it was always dark. There is disagreement today, however, about the kind and number of trees to be planted on the green, and some people are unhappy about the trees that already block the vista of the Congregational Church.

The last bandstand on the green was removed in 1945 and has not been replaced. Apparently the bandstands had provided opportunities for mischief and vandalism. When a proposal for a new bandstand was decisively rejected in a special town meeting in 1965, opponents contended that "a bandstand would be an anachronism on old Guilford Green, that a portable shell would offer greater flexibility, and that the bandstands previously on the green never contributed to the cultural atmosphere of Guilford."<sup>16</sup> This issue is alive today with the recent formation of the Bandstand Committee of the Guilford Foundation, which is asking for contributions to build a portable shell.

The Guilford Agricultural Fair, which was first held on the green in 1859, outgrew this traditional location and in 1969, after years of argument, had to move to larger fairgrounds a mile away. Its opening parade, however, with floats, fife and drum corps, school marching bands and a procession of war veterans and town officials continues to make its way around the green before heading toward the new grounds. A large handcrafts exhibit is held annually on the green, inciting discussions about the use of the green for an event that draws more than 15,000 people from miles around — causing much wear and tear on the green's turf and paralyzing surrounding traffic. The colonial scale of the green may be able to accommodate the people, but not the cars and trucks that bring them.

Guilford's fire department has the dubious distinction of having provided the proverbial last straw regarding monuments on the green. The local paper reported that, after much controversy, a firefighter's monument would be placed on the green temporarily. It still happens to be there, but beyond the issue of its not being a war memorial is the question of whether another monument of any kind should have been placed on the green. When the first selectman commented with exasperation, "I didn't realize the Green was going to be such a controversy," he received the telling reply, "It's an emotional hot bed."<sup>17</sup>

Although the Guilford Town Center, embracing the green, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976, it took decades to give this place a local historic district designation protected by state statutes. A proposal for a historic district study was rejected by town meeting in 1962. Finally, in 1987, after much hard work and public education, the district was approved by a majority vote of property owners. The newspaper's recognition that the "concept of the state's historic district has its roots in Guilford" is a tribute to those who wrote the enabling legislation and worked to protect the green and its historic surrounds.<sup>18</sup>

As Guilford has grown from a few hundred settlers to a town numbering more than 21,000 inhabitants, the green has evolved from a utilitarian square to a dignified presence of enduring social importance. The significant role the green plays for the townspeople is underlined by the comment of David Dudley, president of the Guilford Savings Bank, which faces its southeastern corner: "It symbolizes the way people relate to the town."<sup>19</sup>

To appreciate today's reverent and sometimes impassioned responses to the simple, silent and now urban space of Guilford's beautiful green, one must evoke the ancestral cultural sensibilities of the town itself. The green as the heart of the community does indeed represent a collective remembrance of its historic place at the center of the original colony, even as it functions as an open space that serves the citizens of today and their ongoing activities.

### Notes

1. For a discussion of the resemblance of this plan to the bastide design of French medieval towns built for defense, see Anthony N. B. Garvan, *Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial Connecticut* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1951) and Robert Blair St. George, "Bawns and Beliefs: Architecture, Commerce and Conversion in Early New England," *Winterthur Portfolio* 25:4 (Winter 1990) 241-287.

2. See Elizabeth Mills Brown, "Architectural Development," in *Survey of the Historic Architecture of Guilford, Connecticut* (Guilford, CT: Guilford Preservation Alliance, 1982), 23-68; and *Guilford, Connecticut: Its Green and Its Historic Buildings* (Guilford, CT: Guilford Bicentennial Committee, 1975) for the place of the green within the architectural framework of Guilford.

3. Bernard C. Steiner, *History of Guilford and Madison, Connecticut* (Baltimore, 1897; reissued by the Guilford Free Library, 1975), 259.

4. Guilford land records, 1729, 4:120.

5. Steiner, 221.

6. *Shore Line Times*, 29 November 1928.

7. Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, edited by B. M. Solomon (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1969), 2:360.

8. Guilford Borough Records, 1815-1847, 31-73. See also Joel E. Helander, *Guilford Long Ago* (Guilford, CT: 1970).

9. *Shore Line Times*, 16 June 1910.

10. Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 4-5, 24.

11. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *American Space: The Centennial Years, 1865-1876* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 102.

12. *Shore Line Times*, 4 June 1931.

13. Mary Gay Robinson letter dated 30 April 1877 to the *New Haven Journal and Courier*, in the Mary Hoadley Griswold Scrapbook, p. 12, Guilford Free Library.

14. *Shore Line Times*, 2 December 1928.

15. *Shore Line Times*, 7 May 1931.

16. *Shore Line Times*, 15 April 1965.

17. *Shore Line Times*, 21 March 1985.

18. *Shore Line Times*, 9 August 1989.

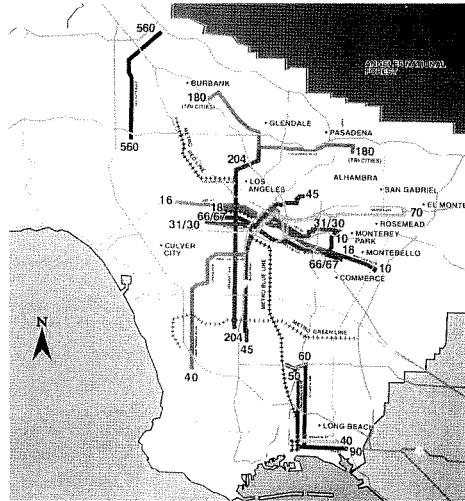
19. Tim Clark and Stephen O. Muskie, "This New England: Guilford, Connecticut," *Yankee Magazine* (May 1989), 136.



The Guilford Green,  
1993. Photo courtesy  
Mark Bloomer.

## From Bus Route to Urban Form: L.A.'s Electric Trolley Bus Plan

*Todd W. Bressi*



Above: Los Angeles' proposed 200-mile trolley-bus network. Below: Electric trolley busses require extensive investment in power cables, support wire, poles and electric substations. Photo by Todd W. Bressi.



In 1989, the little-known agency that monitors Los Angeles' air quality issued a set of rules that aimed to bring L.A.'s perpetually smoggy air into compliance with federal clean air requirements and promised to affect everything from bakeries to driving patterns to backyard barbecues. One of the most intriguing outcomes was a proposal to redesign some 200 miles of boulevards — a network of main streets stretching from the San Fernando Valley to Long Beach and from Beverly Hills to East L.A. — into friendly transit and pedestrian environments.

The proposal came about because the air-quality rules require the region's busses to emit no pollution, one third of them by 2000 and all of them by 2010. RTD, the regional bus agency (now merged into the Metropolitan Transit Authority or MTA), concluded that the only reliable and economical technology for the first phase was electric trolley busses, which had plied L.A. streets into the 1950s.

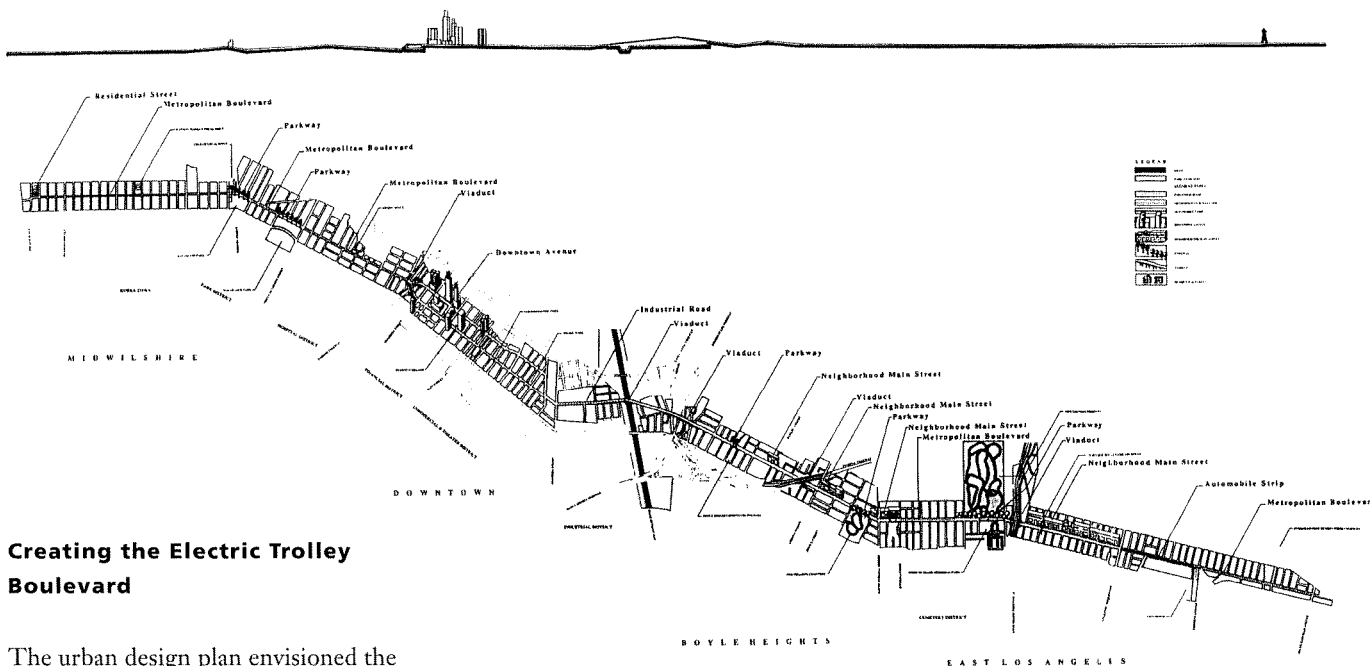
Electric trollies, which draw power from overhead electric cables suspended from poles and buildings, require extensive investment in power cables, support wire, poles and electric substations. This infrastructure would not only be expensive, costing several million dollars a mile, but also would have significant visual impact on the streets where trollies would run. From the outset, the

RTD realized it would have to pay special attention to the trolley's design if the project were to win support.

The design program evolved from what design consultant Doug Suisman of Public Works Associates called a "camouflage strategy" to a comprehensive streetscape project. "With this capital investment we could rethink the boulevard as an integrated transit environment, of which the bus, poles and wires would be components," he said.

The success of the trolley system, in fact, would rest on the success of the streets. "The bus rider, by definition, is also a pedestrian," noted Paul Diez, chief project designer for consultant ICF Kaiser Engineers. The urban design would "reconfirm the boulevard, the street and the sidewalk as indispensable urban settings on which the Electric Trolley Bus system will depend," the project's Urban Design Handbook stated. Similarly, the work of upgrading the streets would provide an opportunity for groups concerned about the project — public agencies and community groups alike — to help in planning it.

Ultimately, the urban design program was incorporated within the project's environmental impact study as part of the mitigation plan, making it inseparable from the rest of the project. Ten percent of the \$1 billion cost, or \$500,000 per mile, was allocated for urban design.



## Creating the Electric Trolley Boulevard

The urban design plan envisioned the trolley project would result in no less than a new type of street, the “Electric Trolley Boulevard,” which would help reclaim Los Angeles’ public realm for pedestrians. Systemwide elements like poles, cables, bus stops, graphics, lighting and planting would establish a continuity of scale and visual character throughout the 200-mile network. They would unify the disparate elements on every street and give the trolley network a regional presence and coherence.

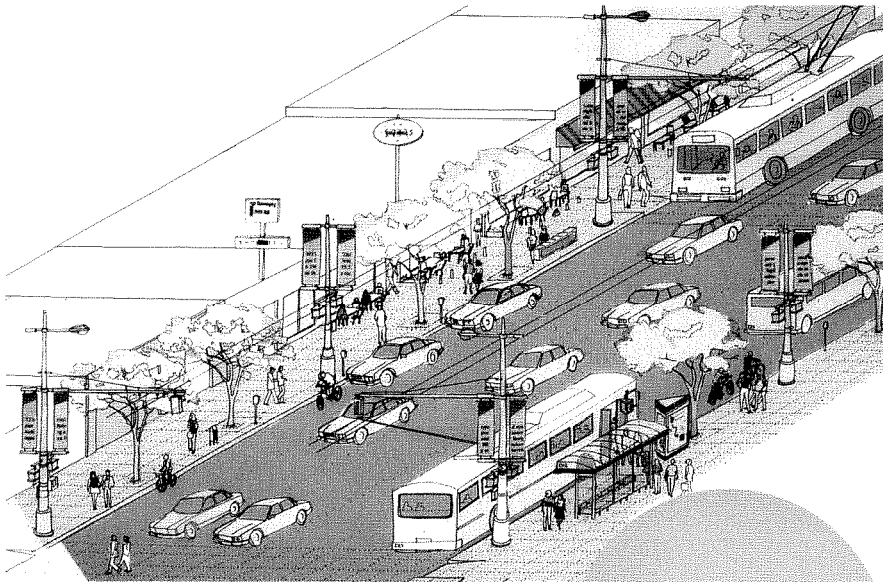
At the same time, the designers realized the streets that trollies would travel were anything but unified in their urban character, which tended to break into segments. The designers decided not to impose a unified infrastructure throughout the entire system or even along each route. Rather, the design would acknowledge the segmenting of the boulevards and routes, making each segment “more intensely what it was” and heightening the contrast between different sections, Suisman said.

The designers studied the trolley routes and concluded that most segments could be characterized as one of eight types — automobile drive, downtown avenue, industrial road,

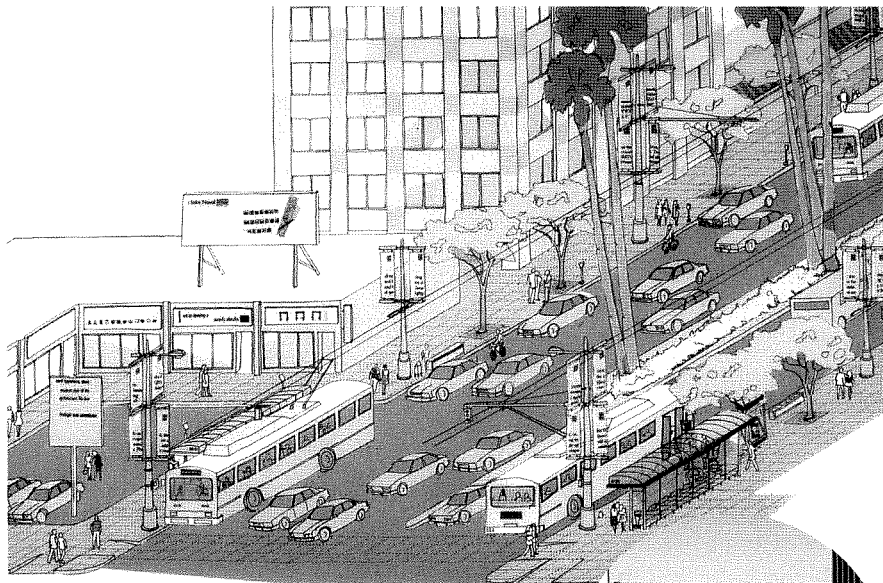
Each trolley bus route was divided into segments based on their general type, for example, metropolitan boulevard, parkway or neighborhood street. Specific urban design guidelines were established for each type. From *ETB Urban Design Guidelines*.

metropolitan boulevard, neighborhood main street, parkway, residential street, or viaduct. For each type the team noted possible variations of the systemwide elements and suggested enhancements that would address the character of local communities. “Some aspects of the system had an overall identity, like signage. But human-scale elements — luminaires, poles, colors, paving — would be more neighborhood related,” Diez explained.

“The Metropolitan Boulevard was the most pervasive type, but also most elusive,” Suisman said. “It is the classic L.A. boulevard, a hybrid between a commercial strip and an urban avenue, an eclectic mix of old and new, high and low, streetwall and setback. It was never going to be dominantly pedestrian, but the trick was to develop a better



Neighborhood Main Street. Typical existing segment (inset) and illustrative example of street with trolley-bus system in place.



Metropolitan Boulevard. Typical existing segment (inset) and illustrative example of street with trolley-bus system in place.



balance between through traffic and pedestrian environment.”

The guidelines did this, for example, by recommending that street trees be planted along sidewalks (following existing species and spacing patterns, where possible) and that palm trees (better appreciated from moving cars) be relegated to medians. Also, they recommended that parking or turning lanes be removed to create additional pedestrian or planting space.

The key component of the trolley infrastructure was the “flexipole,” which could accommodate not only support wires but also street lights, signals, pedestrian lights and banners. A palette of pole bases, pedestrian lights, banner lights, street lights, brackets and caps were offered, and communities could further customize poles by adding planters, street signs and banners. The design would be consistent through each segment, and the scale would be consistent throughout the system. The designers were inspired by the poles used on the Vancouver, B.C., trolley system: “By the time you got done with banner, color and pedestrian light, the pole appeared to be there to give character and identity to a community, and only incidentally to hold up the trolley wire,” Diez said.

As the project progressed, it took on even broader implications, Suisman noted. The trolleys would run on fixed routes, like streetcars, providing an opportunity for land-use planning to be coordinated with transit routes. Discussions began about incorporating the bus corridors into the city’s new general plan. “There is a significant increase in pedestrian traffic along the Blue Line (a light rail route connecting downtown to Long Beach), and more small businesses are opening,” noted one planner. “Anytime you go in and make a solid, firm commitment to a given route, its something you can take to the bank.”

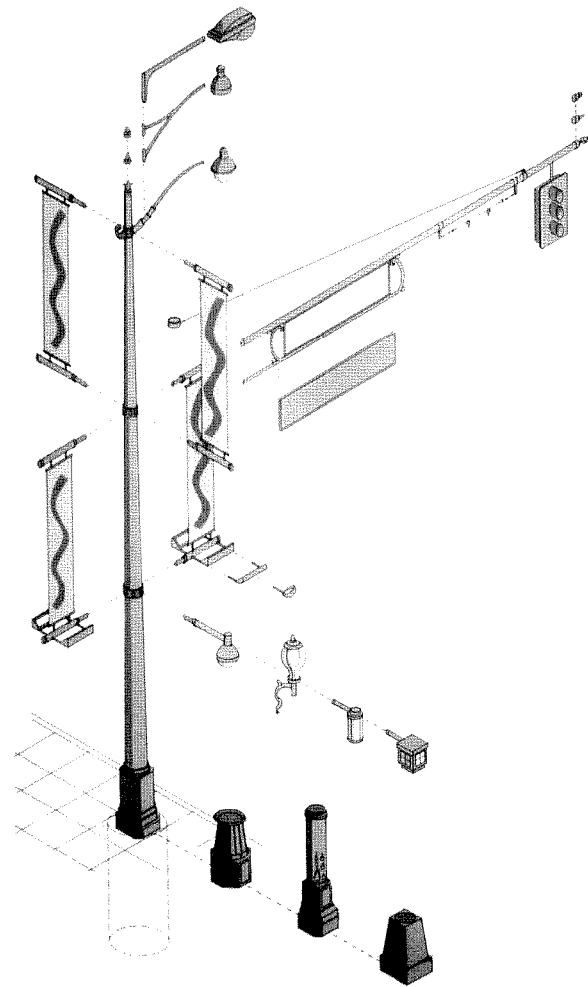


## Stopped in its Tracks

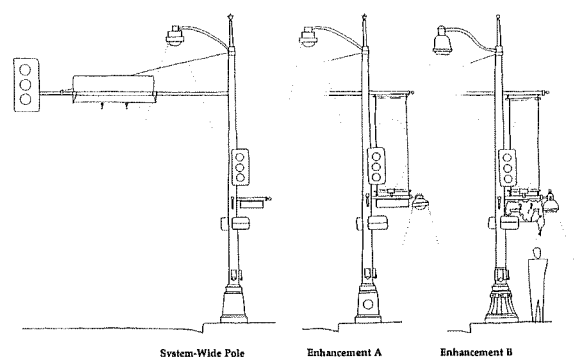
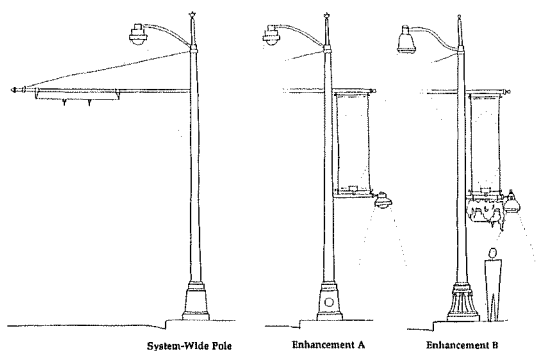
The trolley project always had its critics, particularly those within the MTA who felt the money should be spent on operating costs. Their hand was strengthened as the recession hit California and depressed the MTA's funding, which depends on sales tax revenue. Last December the MTA board, facing a shortfall of more than \$100 million and believing less expensive fuel cell technology would be available soon, cancelled the trolley project. At the time, detailed design was beginning on routes in Long Beach and downtown L.A.

Still, trolley backers think the project helped open some eyes. "Some people are used to thinking of a bureaucracy as a 100 pound canary that can sing anywhere it wants," one MTA insider said. Others are becoming more sensitive to the fact that in our area, where public is not the normal way of getting around, we have to make things pleasant safe and desirable to attract people to ride public transit."

"The point of any kind of large public works project isn't just to move people or hold water. It's to improve the quality of life," Diez concluded. "More and more agencies are starting to think in those terms. More and more agencies are realizing that they just can't put a freeway through the heart of the city anymore."



Conceptual diagram of flexipole and examples of how poles could be configured on various street segments. From *ETB Urban Design Handbook* and *ETB Urban Design Guidelines*. Graphics courtesy Public Works Associates and ICF Kaiser Engineers.



## OCTOBER DIARY: IN SEARCH OF THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

*This fall an unusual grouping of conferences dealing with design, urbanism and sustainability were convened. Places invited a series of review articles from people who attended several of the meetings.*

*Ken Greenberg*

### **Urban Design: Reshaping Our Cities**

*Seattle, WA; Sept. 29 - Oct. 1*  
City of Seattle  
Institute for Urban Design  
University of Washington

### **Fourth Annual Regional Growth Conference**

*Portland, OR; Oct. 4*

### **Congress on the New Urbanism I**

*Alexandria, VA; Oct. 8 - 11*

### **Sustainable Strategies for Community Design and Building Materials**

*Seattle, WA.*  
American Institute of Architects  
(committees on Regional  
Planning, Architects in Education  
and Environment)

### **Building with Value**

*Seattle, WA; Nov. 12 - 13*  
Sustainable Building  
Collaborative

### **ACSA Administrators Conference**

*San Antonio, TX; Nov. 20-22*  
Association of Collegiate Schools  
of Architecture

I attended three important city design meetings that took place in rapid succession last October — Urban Design, Reshaping our Cities; Portland's Fourth Annual Regional Growth Conference and the first Congress for the New Urbanism.

Reflecting on my kaleidoscopic exposure to case studies, projects, papers, speeches and panel discussions, I have concluded that it is now possible to discern a larger pattern in this collective outpouring, one that suggests that an important *prise de conscience* has occurred.

We face the awesome powers of change, dislocation, the loss of the social contract, the erosion of place, the explosion of big box retail on the strip, the proliferation of gap-toothed and depressed urban streets and gated enclaves at the end of the latest highway; we are challenged by the expanding virtual space of the video screen and the make-believe hyperspace of theme park attractions.

Nonetheless, there is a surprising mood of resolve, determination and will to keep faith with the city and to make it work. There is a growing group of seasoned urban idealists who are struggling valiantly to define, forge

and bring into being viable models of urbanity, old or new. They are exhibiting a pragmatism that defies easy ideological classification; they are enthused about the preservation of authentic existing urban places and the possibility of creating new ones; they are eager to form new alliances and to make use of new tools.

### **Reining Regional Growth in Portland**

In Portland, for example, 800 people came out in shifts to a one-day event to hear from a combination of experts, politicians, officials and activists about options for accommodating future growth. Should Portland, they asked, grow up and be more urban, or grow out and embrace continued sprawl?

The planners and elected officials of the new Metro government eloquently and persuasively pressed the audience members to face fundamental contradictions in their own value systems. What are the implications, for example, of calling for preservation of natural areas, on the one hand, and no limitations on personal mobility, on the other?

Most interestingly, the audience expressed a strong skepticism about relying in the future on smart cars and

highways to forestall more fundamental choices about urban form. One might expect people to embrace technological fixes that will keep the status quo going. Although some light rail lines also fall into the category of technological fixes, Portland's MAX system has the potential to be different because there is a strong interest in planning for denser development around stations. Unlike smart highways and rail systems being built elsewhere, MAX might inspire significant changes in the urban fabric.

### **Testing the New Urbanism**

The Congress for the New Urbanism was a gathering with a point of view and a mission. Every aspect, from the careful selection of speakers and participants, to format of assembly, reviews of projects and papers, to the choice of venues (Alexandria's Athenaeum and Lyceum), was designed to reinforce the central message of the movement to reform American urbanism.

Numerous versions and forms of pedestrian and transit-oriented communities were compared and began to be critically evaluated. Serious questions were raised about the impact of these, especially where they occur on greenfields sites, rather than in cities or suburbs. A quite justified concern was that without vigilance, this movement could be co-opted by marketers as simply justifying another style of retreat and withdrawal, bypassing the essential goals of diversity, openness and connectivity.

Many serious questions arose for which there are as of yet no satisfactory answers. For example, none of the recent attempts to forge new hybrids of main street and shopping center are entirely convincing, but historical analysis presented of the evolution of these types was rich and provocative. The audience itself became the subject of discussion. The almost complete absence of non-white faces was a glaring omission, which must be addressed in upcoming congresses.

Nevertheless, the Congress was an extremely auspicious start that holds great promise for the next congress, to be held in Los Angeles this spring, and the two others that are expected.

### **Postscript**

After immersion in these relatively friendly waters, one is left with a sense that we urbanists may have won (at least the battle for) the hearts and minds of many in the design and planning professions, the schools and the media — and a small group of progressive developers whose presence in Alexandria was most heartening. And there can be no doubt that the body of concepts and ideas expressed at these gatherings is gaining credence in such circles.

Yet this victory is still an illusory one. We still have to come to terms with the limited ability of this rudder to turn the ship — the fundamental inertia and intractability of the status quo, whose explicit and implicit assumptions imbue every statute, zoning ordinance, building code, engineering standard, lending decision and marketing strategy across this continent. The tentacles of this status quo may lack the fervor of any conviction

attached to ideas, but they are still spreading lifeless and rarely challenged across the globe.

At the same time, decades of strenuous promotion and institutionalization have ensured that the suburban dream of dispersal, mobility and conspicuous consumption of resources and land maintain a powerful pull on the collective North American psyche. This dream remains the barometer of personal and familial success, as the basis for the major monetary investment of one's life and as the preferred vehicle for escaping involvement with society's ills. A Herculean effort is still required to gain control of the vast and partially unpiloted machinery of control and regulation on the one hand, and to influence the complex nexus of individual and collective choices about living patterns on the other.

In the end, if North Americans are truly to be offered at least the option of more sustainable communities, powerful arguments and tools from outside the traditional arena of design are needed to broaden the critique and clarify the choices. These must combine a rigorous understanding of the real costs to society and individuals of the status quo and a renewal of communitarian values of responsibility, connectedness and concern for health, safety, well-being education and prosperity. We must learn to do this for the whole place and the entire population, not just for me and mine.

## URBAN DESIGN TEACHING AND PRACTICE: A QUIET REVOLUTION?

*Doug Kelbaugh*

If conferences are any indication, interest in urbanism is waxing in America. A sabbatical this fall enabled me to attend five conferences on urbanism, community design and sustainable design, providing an unusual opportunity to check the temperature and pulse of several professional bodies simultaneously.

Judging from these events, the design professions and schools are ready to get serious again about urban America. After two decades of neglect (corresponding to the 30-year cycle of war, prosperity and reform that has uncannily repeated itself in U.S. history since the Civil War), schools are more interested in solving social than theoretical problems.

The most memorable talk at "Urban Design, Reshaping Our Cities" was architect Jaime Lerner's review of urban initiatives taken while he was mayor of Curitiba, Brazil. This growing city of 1.5 million people may be shorter on capital than its North American counterparts, but it is longer on political will: Its expanding very-high-volume bus system carries 50 times as many passengers as 20 years ago, two-thirds of the city's trash is recycled and the city's green space has expanded ten-fold since Lerner took office.

The first Congress on the New Urbanism was convened a week later. As opposed to a conference, a congress is a

compelling idea in this age of exploding information. A congress tends to be serial, strategic and focused rather than open-ended, divergent and expansive. This invitational meeting of 200 people proved able to debate the fine points of urban design as well as to hatch the beginnings of a movement with an overt and heady political agenda.

If future congresses are to bury the lingering ghosts of CIAM but resurrect its spirit (the admirable and ambitious goal of the organizers) they should be open to a broader range of invited experts and, ultimately, to more members-at-large or appointed representatives of design professions and institutions. Closed meetings are effective and even necessary for developing an early consensus but, like the gated subdivisions that the new urbanism abhors, they are not sustainable in the long run. But as Andres Duany said, we must be mindful to keep strident debate in-house if we want to be more effective in the political arena than in the past.

"Sustainable Strategies for Community Design and Building Materials" was not as focussed. It spanned from the molecular to the planetary scale, from unsettling to frightening. Paul Hawken's keynote talk pointed out, eloquently and correctly, that we don't have a chance to survive if marketplace pricing of everyday products does not

better reflect their external costs, such as transportation, manufacturing, disposal and recycling. The market is a genius at establishing price but an idiot at figuring in true costs. This perspective should not be lost on our analysis of land development patterns.

"Building with Value" was not about urbanism per se; it directed the attention of some 400 architects and builders to more energy- and resource-efficient construction techniques. The surprisingly large product exhibit was truly consciousness raising. While the architectural academy has been splitting ever finer theoretical hairs, an entire industry of recycled and environmentally clean products has quietly taken root and is about to flower.

"Urban Leadership: Architecture in Service of Community," was a show and tell about community outreach and civic values in architecture schools. Many of the presentations, most notably Ron Shiffman's discussion of Pratt Institute's Center for Community and Environmental Development, detailed community design centers and other forms of outreach. These centers have both survived from the 1960s and been revived in recent years in greater numbers than may be generally realized.

Civic values, however, must permeate design and planning schools in more pervasive ways than storefront

operations and topical charrettes; a general academic migration to loftier moral ground is needed. As John Meunier asserted, we need to develop and debate theory and ideology to clarify and undergird our urban overtures. This is especially true in suburbia, where rigorous typologies and paradigms are spectacularly missing, but less so in cities, where two millennia have arguably provided ample theory on how to create coherent places.

### A New Era of Reform

If it is time to replay the 30s and the 60s, there are some differences. For one thing, the spirit of reform is more international. Green architecture, for instance, aspires to be a worldwide movement. Although fouling the planet is always of local origin, the results are increasingly recognized as consequential on a global scale.

Another difference is that the new initiatives in the inner cities, often on behalf of the disadvantaged, are driven less by a sense of social and psychological guilt than the initiatives of the

1960s. There is less *noblesse oblige* because rich and poor alike are beginning to realize that everyone is in this jam together. Joblessness, homelessness, air and water pollution, traffic congestion, crime, AIDS, lack of affordable housing and international competition cut across society. There is simply not enough time or money for society, the design professions or disciplines to solve these problems one at a time.

Fortunately, there is a growing consensus among architects, urban designers and planners about what to do — at least what to do about suburban problems. Admittedly, sprawl is an easy and fat target for social, environmental, planning and architectural critics. But what is also becoming clear is the economic albatross that it represents. Sprawl has been encouraged by decades of government subsidies, some obvious and some veiled (for example, fighting wars to secure stable oil supplies and cleaning up tanker spills). Suburbia is a very expensive proposition that artificially cheap energy and land has fooled America into thinking it can afford. Now state and local governments are

increasingly bankrupt; even the federal deficit may be more a product of the suburban economy than recognized.

Placemaking, townmaking and city-making should be our central mission. We need comprehensive approaches, rooted in place, to address society's chronic and interdependent problems. This strategy turns the government's modus operandi on its side — a 90-degree shift that addresses problems vertically rather than horizontally. A city might have a department of neighborhoods rather than a housing or social service agency, and the federal government might have a Department of Appalachia rather than (or in addition to) the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Lerner, for example, described how Curitiba gives people either food or transit tokens in exchange for bags of recyclable waste.

This place-specific, as opposed to problem-specific, approach represents nothing less than a sea-change in our way of making and managing cities. And, a society could do worse than to create good cities.

### Seven Precepts of the New Urban Vision

There has been a quiet revolution going on in town planning and architectural circles over the last decade. Established urban design ideas are being stood on their heads. The new movement has taken various forms and names, but in general seeks to reform design and planning in ways that converge on certain basic principles:

1. A spatially coherent and cohesive sense of place, neighborhood and community that builds on what is locally unique and enduring must replace the anonymity of suburban sprawl.

2. Dense, more compact and clearly bounded communities that preserve open space, agriculture, natural systems and natural habitats must replace continuous, undifferentiated suburban development.

3. A richer and finer-grained mix of land uses, household and building types, and socio-economic groups must replace the single-use zoning that has spawned the monoculture of housing subdivisions, shopping malls and office parks and over-dependence on automobiles.

4. Walking, bicycling and public transit on an interconnected network of streets, alleys and paths that enhances mobility, connectivity, efficiency and health needs to replace the automobile for most trips.

5. Because their social, physical and institutional infrastructure is in place, conserving, revitalizing and infilling existing urban centers and towns needs to be given higher priority than building new communities.

6. The rekindling of the public realm, with face-to-face interaction in public places, must be given higher priority than electronically mediated reality (television, computer, fax, virtual reality, etc.) and to life spent primarily in privatized spaces (the mall, club, etc.).

7. Sustainable environmental, economic and cultural practices, traditions and mythologies must replace the commodification and consumption of natural sources and resources.

## RALLYING AROUND THE NEW URBANISM

*Daniel Solomon*

“Urban Design: Reshaping our Cities” and the First Congress of the New Urbanism took place within a week of each other. I attended only one day of “Reshaping Our Cities” and I was one of the organizers of the Congress so I am hardly an informed or objective reporter. I have only impressions: “Reshaping Our Cities” was polite and uptight, like a faculty meeting, while the Congress was high spirited and intense; “Reshaping Our Cities” was pluralistic to the point of confusion while the Congress was focused to the point of evangelism.

For me, the “Reshaping Our Cities” gathering demonstrated precisely why the Congress on the New Urbanism is necessary: It is important for a group that is not too small or too big to come together to articulate principles based upon common experience and common purpose.

The Congress was like a meeting of the company commanders at Guadalcanal, the ones who have seen the blood close up and have an idea how to win the next battle. Speakers reminded us of what the American city is up against — smart roads, clean cars, an information superhighway, a crumbling economic foundation fueling ever more dispersal, privatization, polarization and fear. Project after project was presented, showing that there are more than a few skilled and savvy makers of urban places whose works have common technique and convictions.

Some of the argument at the Congress came from predictable quarters, other from surprising ones. Vincent Scully opened with a passionate address about the fragile legacy of American urbanism and the destructiveness of the 1960s and 1970s. He canonized Robert Venturi as the person who unlocked the forbidden treasures of history for our use and pleasure. James Kuntsler, author of *Geography of Nowhere*, debunked Venturi’s role (causing Scully to stomp out briefly) but he reminded us vividly, bitterly, hilariously why we had convened — to help one another fight the beast of urban collapse.

Elizabeth Moule, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Peter Calthorpe made statements about design principles extending from the scale of individual buildings to blocks, streets, districts, towns and regions. While these statements may have seemed like truisms, it is probably the first time since CIAM at Otterloo in 1959 that several hundred top practitioners and academics have seemed willing to stand behind such a large, specific and embracing statement.

One evening, five remarkable traffic and transportation engineers indicted their own profession for its myopia and social irresponsibility in contributing to the collapse of American towns. They showed in detail how traffic design can accommodate pedestrian

townscapes, urban space and connectivity. They reaffirmed the usefulness of the classic American grid as a basis of town structure and they established a clear, statistically documented correlation between the configuration of towns and automobile usage.

The next evening there was a very odd and controversial event. Marketing consultants who have been involved with the few “New Urbanism” projects that have built — The Kentlands (in Gaithersburg, Md.), Harbortown, Seaside, FL, and Laguna West (south of Sacramento) presented the principles of “New Urbanism” in their own language, like a rug commercial on the late show. Some (Calthorpe, Andres Duany) thought of these hard-sell spiels as necessary and useful propaganda. Others (Ken Greenberg, Stefanos Polyzoides) argued that if “New Urbanism” stands for anything, it is a better physical structure for American society, not the selling of a new brand of suburban real estate. Significantly, this debate was about tactics, politics and packaging — not about the shape of the world.

One left the Congress with the feeling that the road ahead is very treacherous, full of danger and possible catastrophe. But none of us need venture alone, and the travelling company is amusing, good spirited and very smart.

## CAUTIONARY NOTES ON THE NEW URBAN VISION

*Todd W. Bressi*

A growing number of designers and planners are reconsidering the viability of the urban and suburban development models their professions have been advocating for more than half a century. They are fearful that the post-war landscape has precipitated a metropolitan crisis as severe as and more intractable than the urban conditions that launched reform professions like city planning a century ago.

The Urban Design: Reshaping Our Cities conference and the first Congress on the New Urbanism provided an opportunity to take the pulse of this thinking. Some participants remarked that a new consensus is emerging about the principles that should motivate urban design. That begs a number of questions: A consensus about what? A consensus of whom? And if a consensus exists, what happens next?

### **A Consensus about What?**

The principles that form the core of this emerging consensus are simple: Development should be concentrated in compact arrangements in which a mix of households, businesses and institutions can locate close to each other and in which people can accomplish most everyday trips by walking or transit. New buildings should reinforce public and social spaces like streets and squares and should follow prevailing patterns of building type. These princi-

ples are notable for their democratic, humanist and urbanist orientation and because they consider the integration of planning and architecture at the building, neighborhood and regional scales.

Judging from the scores of projects presented at the Congress, there are other elements of commonality that have not been articulated so overtly. For example, urban design practice and education continue to be associated primarily with large-scale interventions, such as urban redevelopment or planned new communities.

Yet other design problems and urban issues deserve the attention of this emerging urbanist, humanist consensus — including the design of infrastructure (such as water, waste disposal and recycling systems), subdivision rules, zoning text in established places where change is likely to occur in small increments, failed open spaces and declining older suburbs. New York's contextual zoning rules, for example, have quietly undone much of the city's 1961 tower-in-the-park zoning code. In Los Angeles, changing the rules that govern the site planning of supermarkets and mini-malls would have more impact on the urban fabric than projects like Playa Vista ever will.

Perhaps a greater diversity of clients would broaden the new urbanist perspective. The dialogue might include clients like communities that want to design neighborhood parks, public

housing residents who want to improve the places they inhabit, or agencies that do not always consider the impact of their programs on urban form, like school systems. Designers might find new clients in coalitions — universities and the towns that surround them, superstores and main street businesses, transit agencies and property owners near a station.

This consensus is silent on other issues. It says little about design as a process or a means to empowerment. What role should people with a stake in an area have in shaping development that will affect that area? Can a participatory design process be a method of giving people investment in and control over their environments — and thus be a means to urbanism? Whatever the design principles, many of the projects discussed at these conferences were planned through “top down” processes similar to those that have historically alienated designers and planners from people in the communities in which they work.

### **A Consensus of Whom?**

Most of the people who attended these two meetings were architects and planners who consult on public and private projects, scholars and students, and public officials from local planning, housing and development agencies. Notably, elected officials also showed

interest — Seattle Mayor Norman Rice and Jaime Lerner, former mayor of Curitiba, Brazil, offered keynote talks at *Reshaping Our Cities*; Milwaukee mayor John Nordquist participated in the Congress.

However, this group constitutes only the barest nucleus of people whose support will be necessary to advance a humanist, urbanist design agenda. More people from various components of the development industry must be involved. Investors (often banks) establish the criteria a project must meet to obtain financing; developers cultivate and respond to demand for housing, shops and offices; builders use practices and technologies that often favor one type of development over another. Together, these forces can have more impact on the design of places than local zoning, design regulations and the vision of urban designers.

The countless grassroots efforts to rebuild cities and communities are another untapped resource. In recent years, citizens and professionals who advocate causes like historic preservation, community development and environmental quality have forged creative alliances among themselves. Preservation and community development advocates joined forces in 1970s and '80s “back-to-the-city” movements. Parks and preservation advocates have collaborated on “cultural parks” in places like Lowell, Mass. *Reshaping Our Cities* suggested how designers could join with these groups in a broad-based movement; the Congress, even with its pointed political agenda, was relatively mute.

### **Beyond Consensus: What Happens Next?**

If *Reshaping Our Cities* and the Congress were inspiring, they also were sobering. Inevitably the execution of visionary plans requires compromise and results in smaller-scale, more humble accomplishments. Both victories and defeats must be aired and analyzed, as they were at the Congress.

This new consensus must continue developing strategies for action. Andres Duany and Elizabeth-Plater Zyberk realized early on that they must embed their ideas in the codes of the communities they plan; Peter Calthorpe seeks to inject his transit-oriented development proposals into county and regional plans in Sacramento, San Diego and Portland.

But both have experienced setbacks. In Kentlands (in Gaithersburg, Md.), Duany and Plater-Zyberk designed a mall with one side connected to the fabric of a new community at a pedestrian scale. The developer scrapped the design when the retail market changed; current plans are for a standard strip shopping center anchored by a large-scale retail store. In Laguna West (south of Sacramento) Calthorpe proposed reduced parking ratios on the basis of transit and pedestrian accessibility, but retailers rejected the idea.

Any action plan will depend on the support of a thorough research program, neutral and rigorous, freed from the agendas of both retail consultants and visionary designers. The central question is whether compact, walkable communities can deliver on the designers' promises. How do various approaches to land-use mix, density and street and building design affect people's decisions about where they live, work, shop and relax — and how people move from place to place? Both

existing communities and completed new urbanist projects should be tested and assessed by a range of talents — geographers, environmental psychologists, planners, sociologists and others should examine these relationships.

The most important issue to consider — through planning, research and political agendas — is why such a fundamental mismatch exists between the types of places this new consensus advocates and places that are built. After World War II, design and planning theories converged neatly with popular visions for home and community life and with the evolution of financing and development into large-scale, national industries. The result was the atomized, standardized landscape against which the people at these meetings were reacting.

Today's new urbanist consensus finds little resonance either in the practices of the development industry or the vision of the public at large. The greatest challenge, therefore, is to build alliances and find opportunities to demonstrate how a vision really can make a difference.