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Places

Title
What is This Place? What Could it Be?   [EDRA / Places Awards -- Juror Comment]

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4t25x0th

Journal
Places, 14(1)

ISSN
0731-0455

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Publication Date
2001-04-01

Peer reviewed

What is This Place?
What Could it Be?

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It's so easy to take places for granted. And it's so easy to make the same kinds of places over and over again, repeating the same park, the same school, the same street.

What is the same is not necessarily the appearance of the place, although it may well be. Rather, what is repeated is the activities and relationships the place is expected to support and the manner in which these expectations are made manifest.

One might consider this repetition advantageous. It makes life more predictable and easier, since we do not have to discover what each place we encounter is for. We can simply assume from past experience that a park, school or street is the same kind of place it always is and serves the same purpose it always does, and that we can occupy it without paying much attention to what it really is or could be. Yet it is these same questions—what is this place, what could it be?—that can be fruitfully posed in planning, design and research.

Serving on the EDRA/*Places* Awards jury gave me an opportunity to reflect on how good projects uncover and realize the potential of a place. In each winning project, a particular array of actions, experiences and relationships was made more apparent and more possible. In each, daily life and the often mundane but crucial requirements it generates received careful consideration. In each, the designers, planners or researchers positioned themselves inside the place, engaging its present or anticipated life.

Place Type

A place type, such as a school, has embedded within it a web of connections between form, use and meaning.[1] As the type is repeated over time, the connetions become so regularized that the type is made in the same way (form) with the

same expectations about use and meaning.

Many projects that were not contenders repeated formulas of type in an almost stereotypical fashion (the many New Urbanist projects come to mind). The best submissions (including several not chosen as winners) broke with those expectations, responding to the particular relationships at hand or proposing new ones.

The Rosa Parks Elementary School in Berkeley, for example, explores and extends the conventional meaning of school, both in the form of the building and its outdoor spaces and in the activities and relationships it supports and encourages.

Christie Coffin, one of the architects, wrote, "The school is designed to unfold to the community like a flower unfolding," and so it does: Each classroom opens to a courtyard shared by four to seven other classrooms; each courtyard opens to the playground; the multipurpose room opens to a public park; the front door and entry courtyard open to a major street.
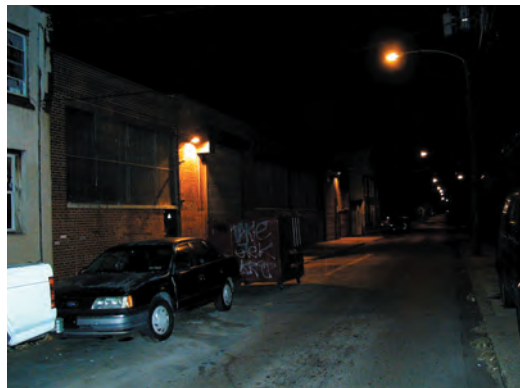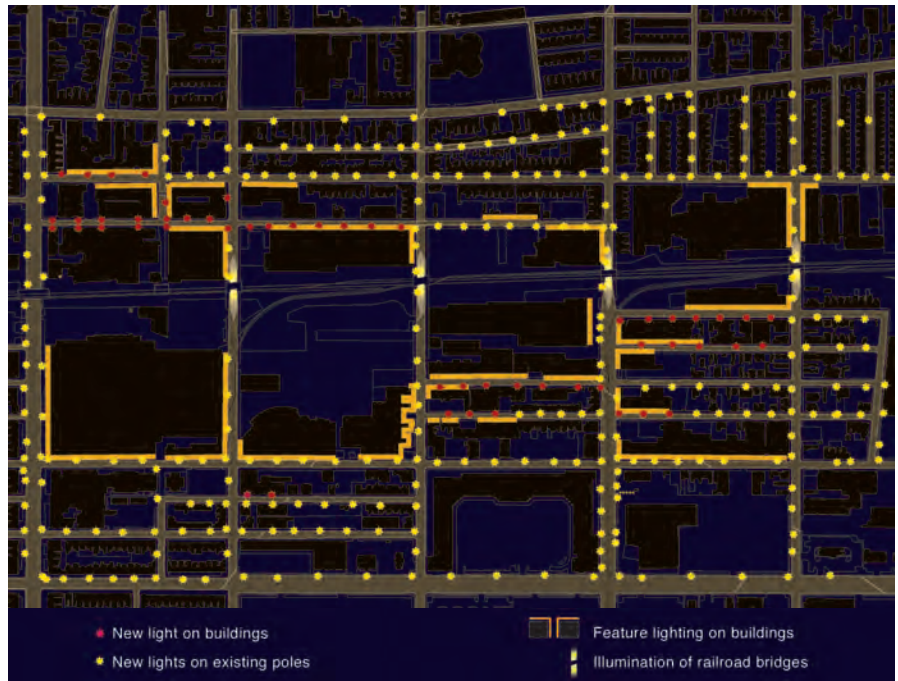
The activities in the spaces unfold in much the same way. The school is designed so that specific rooms can be opened or closed after hours, making it feasible to stage a range of community activities there. The multipurpose room is used for Berkeley Symphony Orchestra rehearsals, meetings, athletics, performances and celebrations; other spaces are used for activities like adult classes and counselling.

Thus the school is truly a community place, generating an openness to the surrounding neighborhood in use while maintaining a degree of enclosure and privacy in form that fosters a sense of concentration and even serenity for the classes and the neighborhood functions.

Cobra-head fixtures mounted on poles illuminate the street but leave buildings, sidewalks and workyards in deep shadow.

A lighting plan calls for adding pedestrian lighting, illuminating building facades and railroad bridges, and improving lighting for signage, entrances and loading areas.

Photos and graphic: Brown and Keener Urban Design

• New light on buildings   ▢ Feature lighting on buildings
∗ New lights on existing poles | Illumination of railroad bridges

Enabling Everyday Places: PRIDE Industrial Park

Sustained attention to everyday activities, in all their practicality and grittiness, is exemplified by the plan for the PRIDE Industrial Park.

The plan focuses on a deteriorated, twelve-square-block area in Philadelphia that is home to a number of manufacturing businesses. With information collected from local business people and from walking tours of the area, the plan recommends a range of physical changes. These include a comprehensive signage system, circulation and street design strategies that accommodate truck turning movements, truck waiting and loading; standards for improvements to sidewalks, fences and streetscape; and a lighting plan.

Significantly, the plan recognizes that the spaces and infrastructure in the area must do multiple duty—supporting the needs of pedestrians, cars and trucks at the same time—and be effective for use both day and night.

—*Karen Franck*

Sponsor: Port Richmond Industrial Enterprise, Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation

Consultants: Brown and Keener Urban Design, Cloud and Gehshen, The Lighting Practice, The Atlantic Group, Lager • Raabe Landscape Architects, Becker + Frondorf

Being Inside

In each of the winning projects, attention was paid to the occupants, to their current and future experiences and needs. Instead of being neglected or treated as a burden, patterns of use informed and, more importantly, enriched planning and design decisions

How strange that something that should be expected as the norm becomes remarkable. Regrettably, the culture of architecture still prizes aesthetic innovation at the cost of providing for the ease and comfort of human inhabitation. Michael Benedikt put it succinctly in a recent essay: *Look around at the state of our architectural culture... . The dominant strategy for class supremacy remains attached to the ascetic/minimalist/modernist program of neediness denial, with all sensuality, all richness, all tradition, all need for physical and psychological comfort surrendered to the unadmitted need for art-world prestige.*[2]

This denial of human needs is part of the generally favored position of the architect as observer, not occupant. Too often, design and planning professionals maintain a detached, objective stance in regard to the places in which they work, failing to imagine, or determine, with information from elsewhere, what the experiences, activities and desires of inhabitants might be. De Certeau characterized this difference in perspective as that of the difference between "voyeurs" and "walkers." "The panorama-city is a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture ... ," he wrote. "The voyeur-god created by this fiction ... must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them," while the walkers below "make use of spaces that cannot be seen."[3] Through their everyday practices they create another city, one of activity and movement.

Because architects are specialists in designing form and manipulating materials, because they rely so heavily on visual representations, because

they hold the values of appearance and aesthetics so dear (and rightly so), there is a natural tendency and need to adopt the position of being outside, of being a maker. Problems occur when that position is the only one adopted and when everyday life and its many practical requirements are viewed with disdain.[4]

In the winning projects, designers, planners and researchers alternated between positions of outside and inside, of observing and making or occupying. Since a professional rarely has the direct experience of occupying the place in question, "being inside" requires drawing information and insights from a variety of other sources. For the design and planning projects, this meant comprehensive and intense participatory processes that involved a variety of parties with different interests and expertise. Such processes are hard work; they demand energy and patience, not a one-off workshop session, as some submissions suggested. The implication is not so much that research or participation matters but that people do. The best projects will demonstrate thoughtful, insightful concern for human inhabitation, pursued in an appropriate and hopefully creative way.

This is not to say that the jury gave no weight to aesthetic issues in design. We did so without a doubt; thus we, too, alternated between being inside, considering how user needs were met through design, and being outside, considering aesthetic decisions and judgments. No project could have been chosen on aesthetics alone; no project could have been chosen if needs were met only in a rudimentary or obvious fashion. This was true as well of the winning research projects, which attended to the relationships between design and use in a comprehensive and highly nuanced manner.

Everyday Life, Special Occasions

I was struck by the degree of attention the winning projects gave to the small, often mundane details of daily life, as well as to special occasions. We all live at both levels, the practical and the celebratory, yet in recognizing design excellence, practical considerations are often overlooked. One project not chosen as a winner, a plan for the Pride Industrial Park in Philadelphia (see sidebar), also intrigued the jury because of its thorough attention to such detail.

In the winning Lafayette Square project, the designers learned from community activists that many of the homeless people who frequent the park do not have watches; now a handsome clock graces the building housing the bathrooms. Providing safe bathrooms was also important to prevent opportunities for crime or drug abuse; thus the bathroom cannot be closed (individual stalls can be latched and a sign outside indicates whether the stall is occupied).

Ironically, these latter design features were not presented in the competition submission; I learned of them during a subsequent visit to the park. While attention might be paid to the mundane, it still may not be deemed appropriate to write about in an award submission. Text about the everyday is becoming more fashionable in architectural discourse, apparently inspired by the ideas of Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefevbre,[5] but the discussion remains quite remote from descriptions of how bathrooms operate, and we have yet to see what the consequences for architectural culture will be.

In his discussion of voyeurs and walkers, de Certeau suggests that while the physical city presents possibilities for and constraints upon movement and actions, walkers also create their own possibilities through their own choices. The architect and the planner can provide opportunities but whether people will embrace them, or create other ones, cannot be ensured.

The jury did not evaluate design and planning projects on the basis of the success of their use but rather on the possibilities for use they offered. The energy and determination required by some forms of occupancy, such as adult programs in the Berkeley school or performances organized by residents in Lafayette Square, are so great that one wonders if occupancy or inhabitation shouldn't be another awards category.[6] If there had been such a category, I might have chosen "The Labyrinth of Rue," an installation–performance held in Atlanta's Oakland Cemetery; three hundred rue plants were planted to form a reflective walkway and the performance of a civic ritual of repentance for slavery.

So far the EDRA/*Places* Awards have recognized those who make places through long-lasting physical interventions and those study places so made. Perhaps it is time to recognize those who also make places through the ways they inhabit and modify them, uncovering through human action and physical adaptation what a place can (also) be.

Notes

1. Karen A. Franck, "Types are Us," in K.A. Franck and L.H. Scheneekloth, eds., *Ordering Space: Types in Architecture and Design* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1994), 245-372.
2. Michael Benedikt, "Class Notes," *Harvard Design Magazine* 11 (Summer 2000), 8.
3. Michel Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 93, 94. Trans. Steven Rendall.
4. See Karen Franck and Bianca Lepori, *Architecture Inside Out* (London: Wiley-Academy, 2000), for further discussion of the positions of "inside" and "outside."
5. See, for example, John Chase, Margaret Crawford and John Kaliski, eds., *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999) and Steven Harris et al., eds., *Architecture of the Everyday* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997).
6. This idea was stimulated in part by reading a draft of the article Stephan Klein prepared for this issue of *Places*. The category I am suggesting could also include various kinds of temporary installations, in museums and elsewhere.