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"DARNING" URBANISM IN BARCELONA

Pasqual Maragall

We are confronting a decisive moment for cities throughout the world, particularly in America, where inner cities are suffering severe problems. The difficulties in solving these problems have much to do with cities' fiscal crises, caused by the nonexistence of strong, effective metropolitan bodies that counterbalance the migration of the middle classes from inner cities to suburbs (where they pay less taxes but continue using the central city) and by diminishing federal aid during 12 years of conservative administration.

I often say that cities are the containers in which humanity places its problems — loneliness, marginality, need. Cities themselves don't create problems; cities can be, must be, places to cope with (I dare not say solve) them. But cities need the means to do this. We need people and their governments to trust cities and invest in urban projects.

Above: Barcelona. Courtesy City of Barcelona.

Opposite page, top: Cerda plan for extending Barcelona, 1859.

Opposite page, center and bottom: Sert plan for restructuring and extending Barcelona, 1930s.

Learning from Barcelona

Following the difficult years in which Spain was ruled by Generalissimo Francisco Franco, Barcelona emerged with a sense of urgency and with enough prosperity and resolve to begin a new political and economic future. Its mayor and its leading architect-planner, Oriol Bohigas, supervised a strategic restructuring based on a few critical policy choices.²

The first choice was to pursue projects, not plans. They concluded that a city is less a coherent system than it is a patchwork aggregation of differing fragments. That is, cities are better understood by piecemeal inspection and analysis of their separate districts. Only then can the city be welded into a whole by the continuity of streets and paths and by the skillful forming of public spaces and architecture. Instead of generating a new master plan, they opted to initiate a series of projects arising from a detailed study of each area. This enabled the city to undertake the repair and reconnection of local places and neighborhoods with strategically located projects that recreated value and pride in its various neighborhoods.

A second critical choice was to focus on reconstruction and consolidation of existing areas rather than to support further urban expansion. They understood that Barcelona was not only too distended, but also that there was more than enough underutilized land and buildings within the existing city to accommodate the housing and general urban development that would be needed for the foreseeable future.

Reconstruction has its own wrenching dimensions, of course. Some areas need to change function as new regional and global economies threaten the viability of traditional practices, and as new standards for public health are implemented. And contemporary culture will exercise its influence in historic sections as new technologies and means of transportation, especially automobiles, find favor.

A third critical choice was emphasizing the making of meaningful social settings rather than focussing on social projects. Inserting a community center here and there in suburban districts will not create urbanity and a stronger sense of community; these districts must be linked back into the city itself to take advantage of the full range of institutions that have

The Case of Barcelona

It has been said that Barcelona is a combination of Florence and Manchester. It is an extremely densely populated city, resulting from the blending of the medieval center with industrial growth that began in the nineteenth century. Barcelona is steadily becoming a service city in a process that has changed the very definition and limits of the city.

Barcelona has a long tradition of urbanism that makes it an important reference point in urban design and town planning. Its modern urban development is based on the extension plan created in 1859 by Ildefons Cerdà, an engineer and utopian socialist. From then to 1930, little more than half a century, the city's population grew tenfold, from little more than 100,000 to a million.

The debate that Cerdà had started on the duality between city center and suburbs was reopened in the 1930s by the Macià Plan, directed by Josep Lluís Sert under Le Corbusier's supervision. Tragically, this plan did not materialize because of the Spanish Civil War and Generalissimo Francisco Franco's victory.

In the 1950s, after the Spanish Civil War a new phase of economic growth began. The rapid growth of population precipitated a housing shortage. The city continued expanding; its boundaries encompassed 500 square km. (of which 100 are wooded) and the population soared over the three million mark.

During those years the lack of democratic control, with non-representative local authorities operating within a dictatorship, encouraged urban speculation and resulted in a disorganized urbanism and an architecture suffering from even greater sadness. Furthermore, Barcelona lacked public investment — there was little drive, ambition or capacity for the city to make decisions about itself.

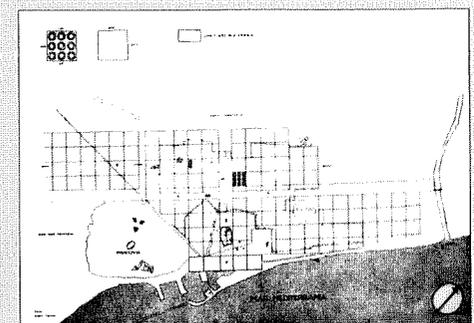
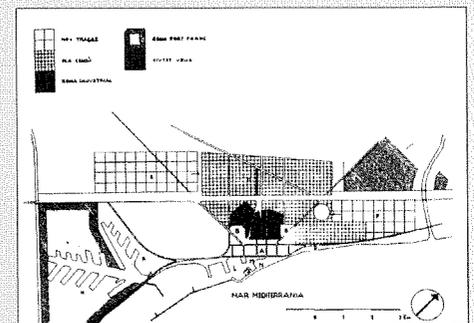
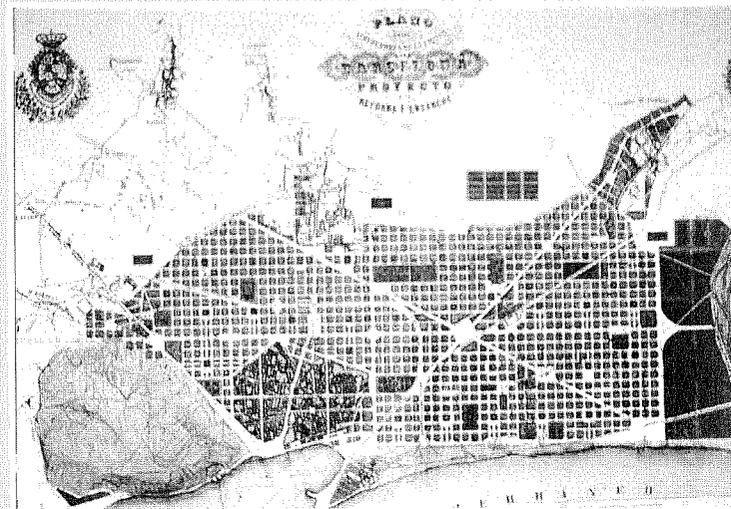
With the arrival of a democratically elected city council in 1979, the situation was reversed. The economic crisis of the '70s and the levelling off of population growth helped by taking pressure off the housing shortage.

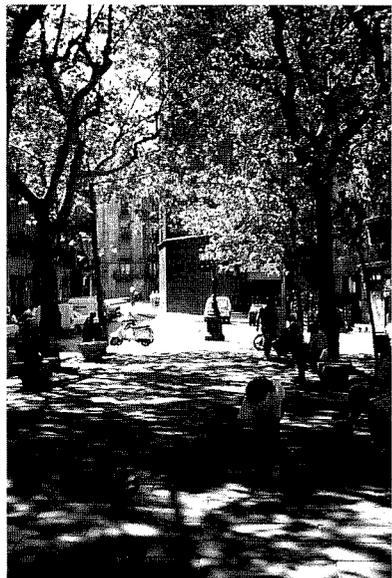
When we took over the responsibility of municipal administration, we had the political will to renew, refurbish Barcelona and eliminate the housing shortage. Barcelona had a general metropolitan master plan, which, despite the fact that it had been approved by previous non-representative institutions, was regarded as valid. Clearly there was a great temptation to undertake a complete revision of the plan, which would serve as a master plan for the reconstruction of the city. This would have been a slow and complex procedure, largely unnecessary, while the city demanded immediate solutions.

We believed the regeneration of the city would be possible only through the implementation of a clear, disciplined urban policy and through the continuity of firm planning management.¹ Both would be aimed at satisfying the great demand for

Mayor Maragall's observations are very important to the American experience. He talks about major problems that are common to all cities: congestion, security, housing, blight, environment and ecology, to which I would add economics and employment. There is no question Americans identify those things as issues — not aesthetics or design. Maragall pointed out, appropriately, that design can be part of addressing some of those issues. That's an important lesson for us, certainly for people in the position to influence public design projects.

— Roger K. Lewis





Interventions in central Barcelona, clockwise from top right: Passeig del Born, El Fossar de les Moreres, Plaza Santa Maria del Mar. Courtesy Robert S. Harris.



been created during the city's long and rich history. In Barcelona, augmenting a network of urban places and monuments assisted such a reconnection to history and culture, and to the institutions and resources of the center city.

However, the center city's urbanity itself is too often a superficial impression of a setting and social life that is quite decayed. Thus it was necessary in Barcelona to initiate both reconnection and revitalization projects. For example, small interventions in the historic core, such as at El Fossar de les Moreres and the Passeig del Born near the church of Santa Maria del Mar, were meant to reconstruct meaningful social settings. Each of these opened a small commons, created a small neighborhood focus and generated greater identity while enhancing the connections to adjacent areas.

The fourth choice was between beginning reconstruction of the city with public spaces or with public housing. Countering the twentieth century's tradition of focusing urban social efforts on the building of housing, Barcelona's planners opted instead to create new public spaces and services. They reasoned that such a strategy immediately increases the wholeness and improves the

quality of life in existing areas, and, when skillfully planned, can be the catalyst for restoring and rebuilding districts.

A final question was whether to proceed with projects using outside consultants entirely or with a specially recruited city staff. Perhaps the obvious outcome was both. An office of urban design was created to oversee both the planning and public works departments and the outside professionals who designed projects.

Overall, the principles in Barcelona focus on the immediacy and integrative power of local projects coupled with an overarching vision of a city whose districts and neighborhoods have their own identities and are strongly interconnected. Perhaps the lesson is clearest when it is understood that local governments must be expected to focus on the public realm, on creating a cohesive physical fabric for our lives. In Barcelona the leadership was present to take such urban reformation forward, and to inspire the response of the private sector to continue the work to create not just urban concentrations, but urbanity — to foster places of privilege everywhere.

new open spaces and public facilities that were desperately needed in such a highly populated city.

The open wounds left by years of speculation, negligence and the city's lack of confidence in its capabilities needed urgent attention. For this reason we put into practice what the first democratic mayor, my predecessor, Narcis Serra, described as a "darning urbanism." It was planning on a small scale, which emphasized the design quality of repairs to the urban fabric and the improvement of the quality of life throughout the city.

It is often said that we gave priority to projects at the expense of the plan itself. I would prefer to call it a process that resulted from actions, which in turn stemmed from projects, which have their own executive dimension and, taken together, are strong enough to redevelop the city.

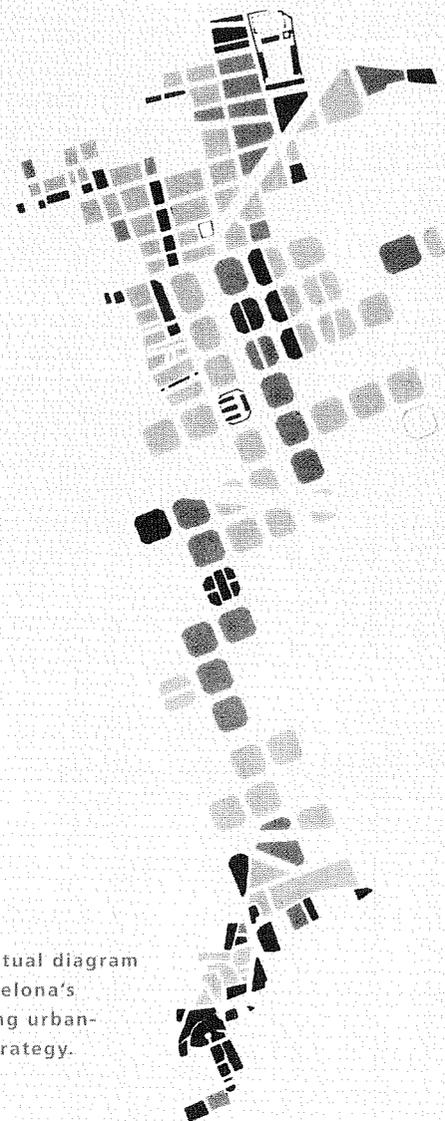
This concept of actions and projects has a long tradition in the field of design and city management.² However, it had been neglected by previous administrations, which were much less committed to the idea of change. These actions may refer to a general strategy of urban plan to prevent them from cancelling each other, but each should be coherent in its own right and sufficiently independent of the general plan that it can survive on its own. Actions should speak for themselves and not depend upon, or place too many demands upon, the rest of the system.

Urbanism in pre-Olympic Barcelona was marked by two fields of operation. These were, first, to give priority to work on public spaces (streets, squares and gardens) because they are the backbone of local communities. Second, we set out to rebalance the city center areas with the outskirts with the aim of converting the suburbs, lacking the most essential public services, into centers in their own right.³ In both areas, the city gained new open spaces by recovering obsolete sites, such as the old slaughterhouse, derelict industrial areas and textile factories and unused railway installations, and sites for which new public facilities had been proposed but never developed.

There was always a concern for the quality of design, not only for the sake of aesthetics but also because we believe that in this way we contribute to the making of the city. One outstanding feature of this concern for design was the street sculpture program, which has furnished the city streets with works by important local and foreign artists, among them an important group of American sculptors, such as Richard Serra, Ellsworth Kelly, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein and Beverly Pepper.

A great change of scale happened in 1986, when Barcelona was nominated by the International Olympic Committee to host the 1992 summer Olympic Games. Organizing the games was Barcelona's aspiration of old, but for us the most important reality was not the games themselves; the Olympics were merely the pretext for our ambition. If we had not been nominated,

Conceptual diagram of Barcelona's "darning urbanism" strategy.



we would have transformed the city nevertheless, probably at a slower pace but nonetheless equally ambitiously.

This new phase of urban transformations was centered on the large infrastructure the city required in order to cope with its historic deficits — mainly a lack of open space, greenery and access infrastructure, such as a ring road, airport and telecommunications system — and was carried out in an exceptionally short period, little more than five years. The main elements were the opening of the waterfront (with the demolition of a railroad that was a barrier between the city and the sea), the construction of a new residential district (the Olympic Village), the building of 40 km of ring roads, the reformation of the airport, substantial improvement in telecommunications (Santiago Calatrava's tower for the state telephone company, Sir Norman Foster's tower for radio and television) and a remarkable improvement of the hotel sector. New sports installations (including the rebuilding of the Olympic Stadium and Arata Isozaki's indoor arena), have substantially enriched the city's heritage.

I would like to stress the strength of the Olympic project in generating social consent. The games and the urban transforma-



Downtown Los Angeles skyline.
Courtesy Los Angeles Community
Redevelopment Agency.

The Vision and Strategies of the Los Angeles Downtown Strategic Plan

Four years ago in Los Angeles, a large citizen committee was formed to develop a strategic plan for the central district. This Downtown Strategic Plan Advisory Committee worked with the staff of the Community Redevelopment Agency and a team of consultants to develop strategies for guiding future downtown development.

The committee agreed that the existing qualities of downtown were to be respected and augmented. This was in direct contrast to the plan formed several decades before, which had replaced whole neighborhoods with new commercial development and had essentially displaced all existing urban patterns and uses. Second, the committee agreed that the existing districts needed to be interconnected in order to reinforce each other and to create a stronger social and economic framework. Third, the committee established a goal of incorporating at least 100,000 new residents in downtown and its environs.

Respecting existing qualities came to be known as “making the most of what you’ve got.” Downtown is a vital economic center where more than 300,000 people are employed. An impressive amount of growth has occurred there in recent years; while this growth is of inconsistent architectural and urban quality, downtown retains an extensive and impressive inventory of historic places and buildings. These include two historic districts composed the city’s early financial center and its first theater district, where the movie industry concentrated its premieres for many years. Nearby are El Pueblo, where Los Angeles was founded; Little Tokyo, the heart of Japanese-American culture in the city; and the civic center (the second largest such district in the U.S. outside of Washington, D.C.). Unfortunately, these special qualities and distinctive places are rather disconnected from each other; between them are too many places of no distinction and no clear value — places of no inherent privilege.

At a broader scale, downtown manifests a coherent structure comprised of three components. The largest, which we call “the city,” includes the civic center, cultural facilities, the financial center, the primary residential and shopping areas, the



(Above) Location map of strategic interventions proposed for downtown Los Angeles.
(Below) Diagram of main downtown districts.



tions related to them were not only a cause of civic pride but also a factor in social cohesion.

The urban transformations related to the Olympic Games have substantially improved Barcelona's quality of life. Now our city is more accessible and more livable, with more open space, a better traffic system and better communications. Even if the economic climate has changed from a year ago, we are in a better position to face the current recession.

The City is the People

The whole restructuring of Barcelona, the recovery of the city through its public spaces, the policy of opening up the most densely populated areas and the aim of terminating the isolation of the suburbs, has been guided primarily by the old Shakespearian ideal: "the city is the people."

The city is capable of absorbing large doses of misery and suffering and the diversity of humanity, all taking place within a given area. But its leaders must find the right way to guide the required processes of constant action against isolation, excessive discrimination and lack of communication — that is, to adhere to the old principle that the city should accept neither barriers nor pockets of isolation. Many times a city must sew the borders between different areas together in order to prevent barriers from arising. Diffusing problems throughout a city, rather than segregating them into pockets, can help as well.

We feel the same passionate love Sert and the modern movement felt for the city. If the city were rescued, they said, "our civilization will have experienced a profound change, yet the continuation of its soul and its heritage will have been assured."

Notes

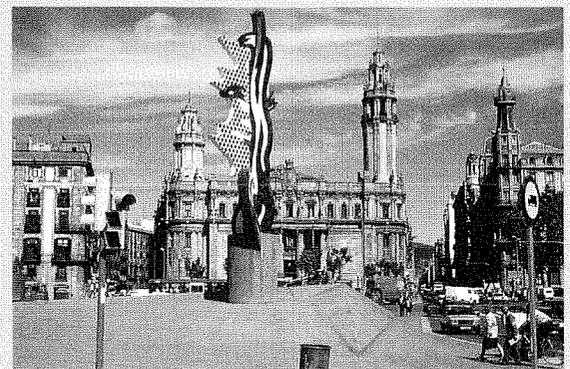
1. Previously, development had been managed only loosely, with much construction occurring in violation of planning rules. The result was too much densification and a loss of design quality.
2. See, for example, Oriol Bohigas, *Reconstrucció de Barcelona* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1985) and Josep A. Acebillo's essay in Josep Subriós et. al, *El vol de la fletxa* (Barcelona: 1993).
3. These efforts followed the so-called "Ten New City Center Areas Plan," created by J. Busquets. It established ten new central areas that were intended to relieve pressure on the traditional business district and rebalance the social composition of the city.



A new space, the Plaça Nova, in the Old City district. The building of the Catalan Architects Association, built in the 1950s, has designs by Picasso on the front.



View of the Olympic Village. The ring road is depressed, allowing the construction of an open space with sculpture.



Roy Lichtenstein's "Barcelona head" sculpture, at the Old Harbor area.

Photos courtesy City of Barcelona.

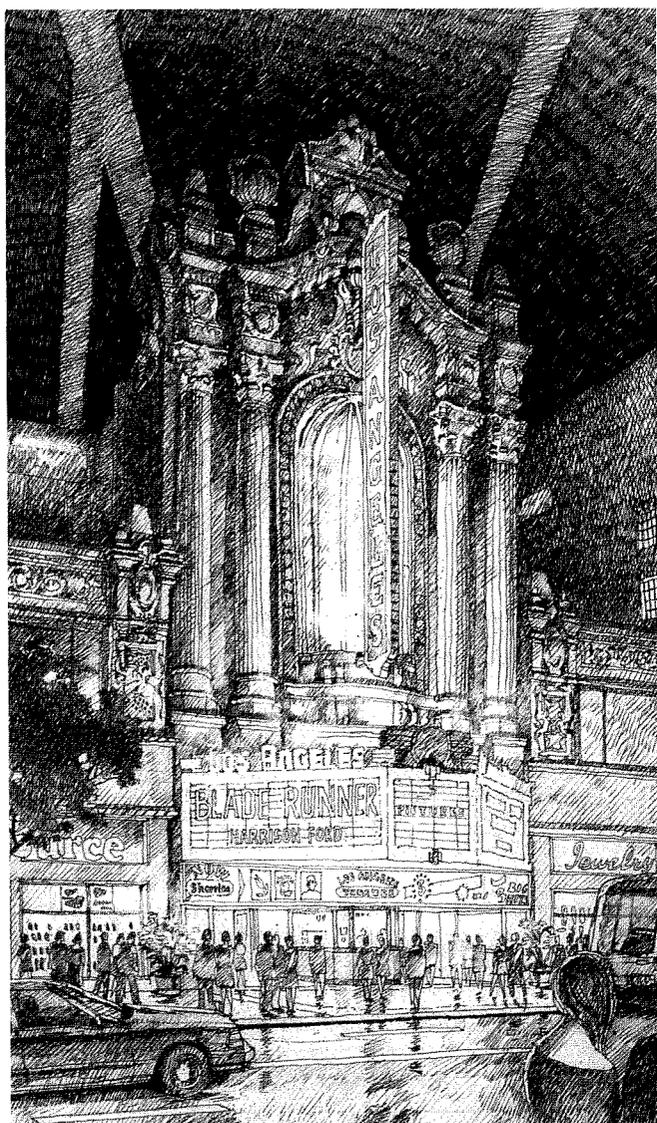
University of Southern California and Exposition Park, with its historic Memorial Coliseum and important museums. A second large zone, which we term “the markets,” includes economically thriving light industrial and warehouse activities, including produce and fish markets, toy and small electronic manufacturing and distribution, garment manufacturing and other activities that serve the region. Between them lies the historic core, including the two historic districts and the principal Latino shopping street.

The plan’s downtown-wide and district-specific strategies are complemented by an idea borrowed from Barcelona and from the direct experience of some committee members and consultants. It is a proposal for a program of catalytic projects to be implemented through both private initiative and public expenditures. These opportunistic and strategic projects are proposed at critical locations where they can augment an existing strength, repair an urban condition, make a new linkage, be a new resource and stimulate additional nearby investment nearby. Each of them relates to an overarching set of basic objectives: economic development, social equity, accessibility and community.

A number of such projects, begun a few years ago, are just now being completed. One of these is the restoration and expansion of the Central Library, originally designed by Bertram Goodhue. That project was funded as part of a larger development transaction that includes the construction of several office buildings, the restoration of a small park and the creation of an important stairway that links the general downtown terrace with the cultural and commercial center to its north on Bunker Hill. The Central Library was brought up to date for its operations, its civic significance has been restored and augmented, and previously disconnected places have been forged into a new and complex center.

Another such catalytic project is the redevelopment of the downtown’s major open space, Pershing Square, redesigned by Ricardo Legorreta and Laurie Olin. This central historic park was diminished years ago when a parking garage was built below it. In recent years it has once again created a public commons, a front door for the center of the city located downtown between the historic core and the new financial center.

Seventeen additional catalytic projects at a variety of scales are proposed in the plan. An especially important project is the consolidation of state offices along Spring and Fourth streets. A number of underutilized historic buildings will be restored and new infill construction initiated to accommodate 3,000 employees. The historic district will be further brought to life not only as the buildings are restored, but also as the new employees occupy and use the district.



Proposal for reopening the Los Angeles Theater in the downtown historic district. Courtesy Moule and Polyzoides, Architects and Urbanists.

A project along Fourth Street between Hill Street and Broadway would take advantage of the already existing subway station and make the linkages between Bunker Hill's corporate and cultural resources and the historic district. Reconstruction of the funicular, Angel's Flight, which will connect the top of the hill and the historic district, is scheduled to begin later this year. Such projects are likely to be attractive themselves and are essential components of an overall strategy for linking districts. Such linkage is as much a strategy for cultural interconnection as for supporting pedestrian movement and enjoyment.

Especially interesting is the initiative proposed for St. Vibiana Cathedral, in fact a rather small church in a rather derelict but potentially central location. As the seat of the Southern California archdiocese and the home of a cardinal, it is the center of a great culture, but it has little visual presence. The proposal is to create a plaza that could support larger gatherings than can now occur within the cathedral and to define that plaza with a mixed-use project, including extensive new housing.

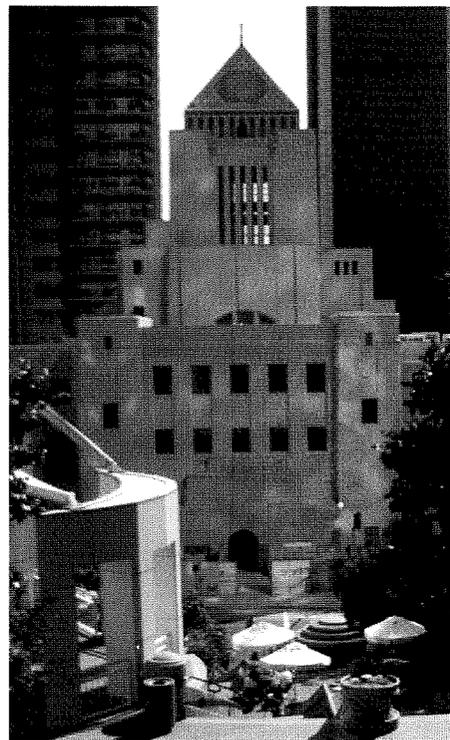
The Urban Design Imperative

In the end, our purpose must be clear: places of privilege everywhere for everybody. Such a sweeping mission can be accomplished. One of the most powerful tools can be the strategic design of projects that are catalytic and place-making, able to augment the economic and cultural identity of a neighborhood or district. Imagine the cumulative impact of such projects in our cities — hundreds of projects each year, most of them privately sponsored, year after year, making places more whole and evocative.

The leadership of architects and urban designers, of public officials and clients, of critics and teachers must be brought to this fundamental cause. We can create a sense of privilege in the places where little has been present before.

Notes

1. Christopher Alexander, *A New Theory of Urban Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
2. Peter Buchanan, "Regenerating Barcelona with Parks and Plazas," *Architectural Review* 175 (June, 1984): 32-46.



Above: Steps connecting Bunker Hill financial district with renovated Central Library and retail district.

Below: Renovated Grand Central Market, along Broadway in historic district.

Courtesy Robert S. Harris.

