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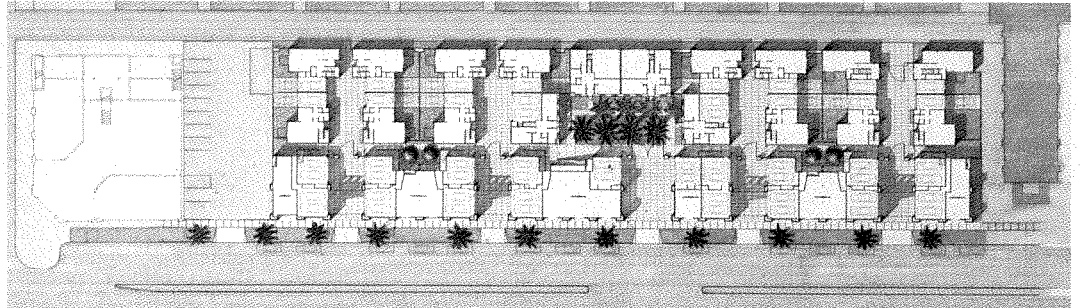
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The Block: Enabler of Urban Architecture



Vermont Village Plaza, a multifamily urban block in South Central Los Angeles.

Top: Block plan
Drawing: Solomon Architecture and Urban Design

Above right: View from side street that passes through the project.

Photo: Grant Mudford

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The Charter for the New Urbanism contains a section entitled, "The Street, the Block, the Building." I am particularly interested in the block for several reasons. First, our office has several commissions to design urban blocks. Second, and more importantly, the reason we have commissions of this type is that the block has become a fundamental morphological unit of the city. Most large-scale contemporary master plans, such as San Francisco's Mission Bay, are built out block by block.

A block is a large enough unit of construction to amortize the administrative time of bureaucracies, banks and developers. Yet it is small enough for garden-variety developers and small enough not to cause a normal loan committee to freak out. It is small enough to be within the range of a modestly scaled architectural practice like my own. But it is large to be generative of urban pattern larger than itself.

This list of small enoughts and large enoughts has a significant consequence. The block is the vehicle through which an ordinary architect, an ordinary developer, an ordinary lender and an ordinary bureaucrat can think about and materially affect the city as a whole. It requires architects to think about their work in large collective terms, and to shun the usual heady jaunts into the intoxicating realm of the self.

Thinking about the city in large terms acknowledges that cities change, that change is the essence of their life. The changes for which we must find architecture are large changes, from public transportation to private cars and, perhaps, back again (but maybe not); from tiny entrepreneurs and individuals filling out a public infrastructure to huge aggregations of investment building the whole thing; from centralized federal bureaucracies building



social housing to the same bureaucracies demolishing all they built.

Each of my office's block-scale projects is a product of these huge patterns of upheaval and change. Yet all of them share common traits. Each creates a pedestrian realm in places where everyone is dependent on automobiles and likely to remain so. Each establishes a pattern to be replicated on a larger scale. Each is embedded in some fragment of older architecture, none of it very distinguished, and each treats those old fragments with deference and respect without copying them either typologically or stylistically.

This aspiration to think about the city in large terms is the single distinguishing characteristic of New Urbanist architecture. It is also what makes our collective work different, and I would argue better, from most of what has gone on in schools of architecture and in the professions they serve for a long time.



Left: Gateway into parking courtyard in the midblock.

Below: Vermont Avenue streetscape.

Photos: Grant Mudford

This aspiration to think about the city in large terms is different from what one might call naive contextualism or what the British architectural press used to call "keeping in keeping." The contextualism in our work is not revivalism, of either what is next door or someone's memory of what was next door.

Ideology about style has crippled the ability of architects to respond stylistically to all the situations in which we are asked to work, when that is in fact exactly what people want from us. In the nineteenth century and first third of the twentieth century that was not the case. One sees this phenomenon clearly in Northern California. From the late 1890s until the end of the 1920s the public institutions of Northern California were built, for the most part, by a small group of gifted and superbly well-trained architects educated at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. This little group (including Bernard Maybeck, Willis Polk, Arthur Brown and Julia Morgan) built a world that was in New Urbanism terms a very satisfactory place. These architects built a city fabric, public monuments, rural retreats, grand campus plans and retail streets of great vitality—and they did it all without any theory to speak of (they were too busy for theories), but with virtuoso skill, unabashed eclecticism, interest in the new and a complete absence of hang-ups and ideological proscriptions.

Then came the Modern movement, forty years of stylistic recitude and an eradication of architectural culture as systematic and complete as the eradications of the Cultural Revolution. In the aftermath of revolution people learn that it is no longer wise to hate knowledge.



At the end of the century the best architects of the beginning of the century take on new relevance—the proto-Moderns like Otto Wagner, with their skill, love of good building and simultaneous fascination with new technologies and absence of stylistic dogmatism.

The end of the century is like the end of a Mardi Gras. All of the great orthodoxies and -isms, political and artistic, lie amidst the litter like discarded masks. We shuffle through them and look forward to going back to work, to behaving with civility and to putting things in order.

Daniel Solomon, a founder and board member of the Congress for the New Urbanism, is a San Francisco architect and professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

Project: Vermont Village Plaza
Architect: Solomon Architecture and Urban Design
Landscape architect: GLS Architecture/Landscape Architecture
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