Preserving Livability:

URBAN DESIGN RESPONSES TO THE COMING COMMUTER CRUNCH

Urban designers will not solve traffic problems in downtowns and other large employment centers by themselves. They will have to join with politicians, builders, public administrators and citizen activists in order to make a difference.

Designers can contribute to a shared effort in at least three important ways:

- they can help define the problem;
- they can invent ways of solving them; and
- they can suggest planning processes that will allow good ideas to move into the city fabric.

The Challenge Defined

Defining the problem can be a funny business. We’re not sure there is a problem. For some, the theme of this issue may elicit visions of job centers growing out of control, streets clogged with cars and people, no places to park and long waits.

Hold on!
Remember that for at least 25 years city planners have been lamenting the decline of central districts. Really good downtowns always have parking shortages, crowded sidewalks and crowded streets. We have a long way to go in California central areas before they achieve their urban promise as complex and lively places. We should not erroneously define the happy revival or discovery of city centers as a problem.

Of course real traffic related problems can be found in major employment centers. Finding ways of avoiding congestion and parking shortages is important, but we are primarily concerned with preserving the livability of our central areas.

We must not let auto-oriented design replace design-as-if-people-mattered.

Meeting the Challenge

Assuming that we expect a commuter crunch, as long as cars remain the primary mode for travel to job centers there will be the tendency to crowd out the qualities that make cities attractive and enjoyable places. Do city planners want to tackle this problem head-on? If we do, it seems clear to us that the closer people live to where they work, shop and have fun in necessarily compact arrangements, the less of a commuter crunch there will be. Unless urban designers with all those other actors are willing to work forcefully to bring about such basic changes, auto commuting will continue, land will be devoted to cars, and designers will be left suggesting ways to mitigate the tension between man and his machine.

Most of the methods and tools for mitigating the impact of cars on the livability of central areas are known by now to most of us, so we only want to touch upon the ones that seem most promising (or that we like the most) and we want to stay away from too much detail.

Public spaces in major urban centers are critical and ought to be civic spaces — not merely private backyards for office workers of the kind that get tacked onto each separate office building. They are needed to give people refuge from car-dominated streets. There is nothing better or cheaper than widened, tree-lined sidewalks to sig-
nal drivers that they are in pedestrian territory and to give people a sense of predominance over the automobile. "No way streets" and transit malls have also been successfully used for this purpose, when there is the foot traffic or ridership to support them. Pedestrian space can also be created by dead-end non-assent streets with public plazas.

In addition to providing pedestrians with their own territory, the auto can be directly managed to keep job centers livable.

Preventing commuter traffic from invading nearby residential neighborhoods is a special concern. Traffic diverters, narrowing of pavement at intersections, controlled access, complete closure and other design options should be explored as ways of protecting these areas.

We know of a city in Brazil that manages through individual computerized lights to move traffic keeping drivers and pedestrians reasonably clear of each other to boot. Why can't we do that here? On a more detailed level, mixing cars and people by removing curbs and other distinctions between the street and the sidewalk can be successfully employed to slow traffic and to give more of the street over to the pedestrians. Traffic chokers and other intentional obstructions are also available for reducing traffic speed to a rate more compatible with street life.

We all know the problems of parking garages by now: they present traffic hazards and create blank walls that deaden city life. Avoiding multiple and wide curb cuts, or providing ramps inclined to the second level with arcaded sidewalks beneath can prevent traffic hazards. Isn't it also time we stopped permitting each private building to have its own private parking space, or at least stopped requiring parking rations that put buildings out of each other's sight?

Mixed-use development is another way of enhancing the livability of our job centers. Mixed-use development will reduce the need for trips across a downtown area and will help preserve the distinction between auto-space and human-space.

Planning Process
These design ideas that provide distinct places for people that manage the auto and that encourage mixed-use development are suggestive of what urban designers can contribute. But we must also concern ourselves with implementation. Organizing action is part of good planning. If we are to be effective, urban designers must inform and involve not only downtown business and labor interests but all of the citizens and neighborhoods which can and should make a difference. To reiterate, urban designers cannot solve the traffic problems by themselves. As Mumford put it, "the hopeful alternative is not an idle dream, but it will require the ability to face realities, a sense of public responsibility and a boldness of imagination."

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