

City's Top Planner Wants To See More Than Just New Plans

In the built environment, planners often function more as tasters than as chefs, throwing out what others have prepared before it reaches the palates of the public. But when Amanda Burden, the city's new Planning Director, speaks of her department's priorities, it's clear she wants the department to more directly shape the design of buildings and streets, and to see that they are actually constructed.

"I want to leave a built legacy, for the mayor, for the city," said Burden one afternoon from her office on Reade Street.

Overseeing the design and development of specific sections of the city, as opposed to rewriting planning codes or other procedural adjustments, appears to be the top priority of Burden's administration. This sets her apart from her predecessors, as well as many if not most city planning departments around the country.

"This is a great time for planning," said Burden, who comes to the job after 12 years on the Planning Commission. "The whole structure of city planning has changed under Bloomberg. This is the best time for planning since Mayor Lindsey," she said, naming the liberal Republican mayor of the late 1960s who was widely perceived as revitalizing and improving the city's planning department.

Appointed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Burden reports to Bloomberg's deputy mayor for economic development, Dan Doctoroff,

who has been the mayor's point man on Lower Manhattan, the 2012 Olympics and the redevelopment of the West Side. Having Burden report to Doctoroff appears to reflect a desire for planning to play a more direct role in the development of the city and in the building of the city's economy. Under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the city's planning department was grouped with schools and cultural affairs, Burden said, which meant that it had a less active role in the city's affairs.

The planning department's Strategic Plan (see www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/home.html) shows Burden's and the administration's priorities. Although it talks of environmental protection and neighborhood enhancement, its focus is new development in Lower Manhattan, the Hudson Rail yards on the West Side, the Greenpoint waterfront, the regional downtowns in the Bronx, Brooklyn and other areas. The plan also has sections on "Design Excellence," as well as improving transportation.

When talking of these areas of future development, Burden speaks of beginning planning with urban design rather than zoning. In general, Burden wants to push the city's planning department more towards urban design, which is an admirable goal. Designing a place that shows buildings and streets, she said, requires a more specific vision than colored zoning codes on a map.

"If you sell a zoning plan, people are either bored by it or frightened by it," Burden said. A piece of urban design, in comparison, at least has a chance of captivating them.

Burden's passion for design is clearly genuine. Books of architecture lay scattered about her office, and photos of Santiago Calatrava's spider-web bridges illustrate the department's web site. In a recent interview in the national Planning Magazine, Burden said she came by her passion for design in part through her famous stepfather, the late Bill Paley, longtime owner and president of the CBS network. Paley selected architect Eero Saarinen to design the company's elegant but foreboding headquarters in Midtown, known as "Black Rock."

The Strategic Plan also emphasizes transportation as a key factor in helping development. Although the state Metropolitan Transportation Authority handles transit, it works with the city's planning department, which carries out long-range transportation planning studies. On transportation, the mission to improve commuter rail to Lower Manhattan was a priority. She spoke of wanting to "tap the big commuter shed in Long Island," and building a "super subway."

Burden began her career with William H. "Holly" Whyte, as famous in urban planning circles as her stepfather was in broadcasting. She began working for Whyte's Project for Public Spaces in 1976, shortly after graduating from Sarah Lawrence College.

During most of the 1980s, she oversaw the design and planning of Battery Park City in Lower Manhattan. In general, this area represented a great leap forward in big city planning, even though it lacked the affordable housing originally promised, and the buildings and streets lack the more intimate scale characteristic of much of the city.

Speaking in Planning Magazine, she said Battery Park proved to her that "putting public

investment into high-quality open space, speeding approvals, and employing design guidelines worked. Without these, we would not have been able to attract the private residential investment or the World Financial Center buildings. That's where I learned how density, public open space, and streetscape could change the perception of a space. It really demonstrated to me that good design is good economic development."

--Alex Marshall.

Critiquing The New Urbanism: Still Waiting For A Real One

Book Review: *The Seaside Debates. A Critique of the New Urbanism*. Todd W. Bressi (Editor). Rizzoli 2002.

In a formal critique of a piece of art or architecture, you are expected to describe, analyze and judge – sharply, fully and skillfully. You are expected to not only give an opinion, but to describe what you like or dislike, and make suggestions for how a work could be improved. The expectation is that after a rigorous critique, the perspectives of both the artist and the observer will be enlarged.

As such an effort, this recent book by the New Urbanists is largely unsuccessful, and the book's title is misleading. While the "debates" within the book's cover are valuable, the architects and critics talking don't expand the discussion much beyond accepted New Urbanist points of view. Only one real critic of New Urbanism, Professor Alex Krieger, was present, and even he has a long history of working within the New Urbanist camp.

A true critique or debate about New Urbanism would have been valuable. The

movement plays a strong role in the development battles in New Jersey and Connecticut, where both the private and public sectors are beginning to carry out plans under this, as well as the “Smart Growth,” label. In New York City proper, the New Urban design philosophy has less relevance, except as a reminder of the traditional urban form that many in the city accept without thinking.

The book emerged from a symposium held at Seaside, the famous neo-traditional community in Florida. Gathered at Seaside were some neo-traditional designers, including Ray Gindroz, Douglas Kelbaugh, Stefanos Polyzoides, Jaquelin Robertson and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, as well as architecture critics and writers such as John Kaliski, Colin Rowe and Witold Rybczynski. Projects are presented, and general reaction and discussion from the group is recorded. The projects include a renovated main street in Kendall, Florida; Crawford Square housing district in inner city Pittsburgh; Seattle Commons park in Seattle; the Cornell subdivision in Ontario, and several others. Some of these projects are built or partially built; others are just plans. In addition to the critiques of these projects, the book includes several essays.

The authors mostly “debate” about how to fine tune neo-traditionalism, rather than question the design philosophy’s essential precepts or strategies. The only true critic is Krieger, a practicing architect and urban designer, and chairman of Harvard’s urban design program.

Krieger argues that while New Urbanists have proclaimed support for such laudable goals as ending sprawl, revitalizing inner cities, increasing public space and increasing diversity, the movement has largely produced

isolated and privatized, automobile-dependent subdivisions that are marketed with “carefully edited, rose-colored evocations of a golden age of small-town dominated urbanism.” While the book’s editor, Todd Bressi, is to be praised for including Krieger’s essay, it would have been interesting to hear what the community gathered there thought of it. For whatever reason, no reaction to Krieger’s highly critical perspective is given.

Along with Krieger, it would have been better to have included architects, planners and writers from other schools of thought. This would have produced a more interesting discussion, even if would have been somewhat incoherent, as true debates often are. It’s certainly true that whatever New Urbanism is – and even that is fiercely debated – its worth is by no means universally recognized.

As Krieger says, there is a general agreement on the maladies of 20th century urban development. But have the New Urbanists given true solutions, or just nostalgic facades? In centuries to come, archeologists may be bewitched to come across the ruins of these melancholic, postmodern urban settlement patterns, which are both of, and apart from, their times. In their effort to tackle urban life through a deterministic design lens, New Urbanists have yet to build places that have a dynamic sense of place, where the landscape is in a state of flux, yet still coherent.

---L. Nicolás Ronderos, Associate Planner, RPA

Rebuilding Lower Manhattan

The Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York, the coalition convened by Regional Plan Association, released several documents

this week that it hopes will have an impact on the redevelopment of Lower Manhattan. They include A Planning Framework to Rebuild Downtown New York, a separate report of the Economic Development working group, and the final report from Listening to the City.

The report by the Economic Development working group is the product of nine months of work by a team of noted economists, planners, community advocates and others. The plans call for actions that will both revitalize Downtown and create a stronger and more equitable regional economy. These include investments in transportation, cultural amenities, and affordable housing Downtown, as well as strategies to leverage these investments to strengthen other urban centers and improve access to well-paying career opportunities. While the report says such investments should attempt to protect and strengthen the area's role as a global and regional financial center, it also examines ways to diversify Lower Manhattan's economy. In the long run, a more diverse Lower Manhattan would build new industries that would generate wealth for the city and region as a whole.

The final report from the Listening to the City event lists some of the participants' top priorities. They included constructing a transit hub, restoring a street grid through the site and the addition of a major symbol to the skyline.

All Civic Alliance reports are available at www.civic-alliance.org/.

Calendar

Sept. 27, 2002 from 8-12:30 p.m. -- Rebuilding and Renewing Transportation in Lower Manhattan after 9/11: Decisions, Priorities and Timing . At the House of the Association, 42 West 44th Street (between 5th and 6th Avenues). See "calendar" at www.abcnyc.org.

Oct. 3, 9 am – 5 pm. -- The Architecture Research Institute and the Guggenheim Museum will present a seminar entitled The Grands Travaux: Its Legacies and Lessons - Are There Lessons here for the World Trade Center Design? At The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Peter B. Lewis Theater. This one-day symposium gathers politicians, architects, scholars, urban planners, and critics to discuss the legacy of French ex-president François Mitterrand's Grands Travaux project and its relevance in today's consideration of rebuilding downtown Manhattan. Participants include François Chaslin, Jean Louis Cohen, Paul Goldberger, Thomas Krens, Bernard Tschumi, Beverly Willis and Paris Mayor Bertrand Delanoë. Tickets are \$20. Call 212.725.7200.

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