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Plurality in Place: Activating Public Spheres and Public Spaces in Seattle

by Shannon Mattern
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The redevelopment of Lower Manhattan has shown that urban design as well as the economics, politics, and drama that surround and inform it can capture wide public attention. Several trade journals have proclaimed that the World Trade Center design competition has placed architecture and planning on the popular cultural radar screen. The World Trade Center project has become the *public s* project.¹ Local, regional, national, and international publics have realized that this small corner of New York City will be called upon to represent not only the city s identity, but also the nation s and the globe s. The new World Trade Center will have to reflect the ethos and ideologies of a newly awakened world. Global publics follow the design process and form opinions, however uninformed, on the proposals. Design journal editors have also challenged design professionals to ask themselves whether they want such public attention to be measured as public opinion (as nothing more than a popularity contest: a charmed public voting for the design team with the best public relations campaign) or whether they want to transform that public attention into meaningful public engagement with and input into the process of design. And this decision raises a host of questions. Why should those publics be uninformed about design, and how could they become informed? Could such design and development projects give rise to a public sphere despite their highly technical and political nature? And if so, who would be included in that public sphere, and how should their input be weighted and evaluated? Further, how can designed and developed spaces foster the growth of (and sustain) public spheres? How can a public see itself reflected in its physical spaces, and how can those representative spaces become actual sites for congregation to further the development of public spheres?

These same questions arose in a smaller-scale and less well publicized context a few years before in a city across the country from New York. Seattle, Washington, like many second- and third-tier cities undergoing redevelopment during the boom years of the late 1990s, was reassessing its position in relation to first-tier global

cities like New York. As the architect designing the city's new public library building put it, Seattle had to decide whether or not it wanted to be a real city, and what kind of a physical city would reflect its redefined identity. Seattle serves as an example to other cities looking to develop their own public realms. From Seattle's experiences, we learn, first, that successful public design requires a public composed of all stakeholders-in-public-space (designers, developers, financiers, civic officials, citizens) to reassess what constitutes a city, acknowledging the inherent human-ness, public-ness, plurality, and dynamism of the urban environment. Consequently, public design requires an understanding that one manages a city's evolution not by engineering physical development, but by articulating and effecting the civic visions and urban realities of the city's multiple publics. Second, in order to articulate that plurality of visions, one must take stock of the city's multiple identities and its individual inhabitants' varied ways of experiencing the urban landscape. Third, all stakeholders-in-public-space must examine ways of reflecting plurality and public-ness in their city's physical space; these inquiries will inevitably involve considerations of what constitutes contextual and relational design (how physical space captures a *sense of place*) and how a building conforms to architectural type. I will argue that publics benefit by expanding their definitions of contextuality and architectural type, by understanding these concepts as something shaped more by the plurality of local spatial needs and practices than by rigid guidelines or universal rules. Fourth and finally, a city defined by a plurality of urban experiences must involve that plurality of voices in the city's design; cities must assess the scale and scope of public involvement and recognize the necessity of that involvement to successful civic design. The aim of this paper, then, will be to examine these issues in detail within the context of Seattle redevelopment. To this end I will begin by looking at different ways of *thinking about* and *talking about* urban space, particularly that of pluralistic Seattle. I will then address how the practical design process (and the publics invested in it) might incorporate these ways of thinking and talking about the city into physical urban space. Finally, I will examine how the public process of design might be managed in such a way as to allow a true plurality of visions and voices to be seen and heard.

What Makes a City

When the federal government cut its support of Boeing's 747 program in the late 1960s, 65,000 of the company's 104,000 workers lost their jobs. But instead of spelling devastation for Seattle, home to Boeing's headquarters, the layoffs represented for many an opportunity for revitalization. It was the best thing that happened to Seattle, claims local architect and *Seattle Times* columnist Mark Hinshaw.² The catastrophe forced the region to nurture a wider range of businesses and adopt an ethic that balanced economic vitality with environmental values. It set out to do so and planted the seeds that later blossomed into a myriad

of software and biotechnology companies.³ Thus in the wake of this massive change, Seattle began to reinvent itself. The city attracted young people from the East Coast and California. New industries emerged. At the same time, the region's new planning ethic and environmental sensitivity fostered increased interest in historical preservation. As the nation approached its Bicentennial Celebration, writes architectural historian Lawrence Kreisman, King County residents focused attention on their local history, finding in their community roots a source of pride and accomplishment.⁴ Citizens launched campaigns to save Pioneer Square and Pike Place Market and revitalize the waterfront, which now includes a new park, aquarium, marina, and promenade. And in 1973, the Office of Urban Conservation was formed, and the Historic Seattle Preservation and Development Authority followed in 1974.⁵

In the 1980s, Seattle began to reassess its urban scale, and the crisis of representation brought about by Seattle's evolving urban identity was reflected in attitudes toward architecture. Increasing localization of political power and sensitivity to local values precipitated the rejection of Modernist styles of architecture. The construction of the 76-story Columbia Sea-First Center in 1985 generated controversy over building heights.⁶ And when new architectural styles arrived in the 80s, area architects, for the most part, remained indifferent. According to Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, architecture professor at the University of Washington, Seattle architects never fully endorsed the directions of postmodernism that absorbed much of the American architectural profession during the period. In place of the earlier shared vision, recent work by Seattle professionals demonstrates a multiplicity of architectural directions.⁷ Seattle architecture embodied stylistic pluralism. But it is important to note that pluralism in style does not necessarily mean that the city's built space represented the plurality of its inhabitants, nor did it guarantee a plurality of urban experiences for the city's public. The same developer can build the same building with a variety of skins, but it's still the same building.

In the early 1990s, Seattle's music scene put the city on the international popular culture radar, and by the late 1990s, Seattle had become a city on the map of the global economy. The cumulative wealth of Seattle residents was estimated at nearly \$300 billion, comparable to that of the residents of Manhattan.⁸ It was also the fifth-largest container port in the United States and the twenty-fifth largest in the world. By 2005, it was estimated, international trade would account for nearly one-third of all jobs in Seattle.⁹ And companies like Boeing and Microsoft, both at one time headquartered in the Puget Sound region, had established Seattle as an information hub and connected the city to international markets. Paul Schell, Mayor during the city's boom years, purportedly strove to regulate his city's evolution:

We're trying to manage the transition from regional center to major international city without losing the core values of the place in the process. We're eight and one-half hours from Tokyo and eight and one-half hours from London; a basically conservative city; a collection of small communities, now overlaid with 110 languages and living at the epicenter of technological change. It's not an easy job.¹⁰

And in managing that transition in scope, from a local to a global city, the city had to ask itself not only what those core values of the place were, and how they would be saved, but also who we, the managers of the transition, constituted. The transition would be more than just a political, economic, morphological, or architectural one; it would also entail an evolution of civic identity and public character. The evolution of Seattle as a material city is thus bound up in the evolution of Seattle as a representation, an idea, and a public.

But the city is never singular; it is never a place, an image, a representation, a public. As Michel de Certeau acknowledges in his seminal work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a city is a plurality of temporalities and subjectivities. The utopian city might exist in a nowhen, a synchronic system, but the real practiced or experienced city is a physical palimpsest, concretely representing, at once, the various stages of its history; the city is thus a product of memory, present awareness, and foresight.¹¹ The materiality of the city—the brick and stone and concrete, plotted in accordance with master plans envisioned decades, even a century, before—necessitates the existence of vestiges of eras past. Particularly in Seattle, sensitivity to environmental conservation and an historic preservation ethic created a city that is a physical fusion of past and present realities. But de Certeau also cautions against thinking of the city as the creation of a universal and anonymous subject, for the practiced city is, instead, the product of the microbe-like, singular and plural practices of its inhabitants.¹² It is the swarming mass of pedestrian movements—a system of singularities that constitutes and activates the city.¹³ The city is, thus, a product of a public practice.

Geographer David Harvey agrees with de Certeau that the postmodern city is a palimpsest of past forms superimposed upon each other.¹⁴ And although he doesn't go so far as to proclaim the city a product of multiple, subjectively experienced practices, he does acknowledge the dynamic nature of urban experience and the existence of multiple cities: the imaginative, the representative, and the material. In *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference*, Harvey explains that shifts in the experience of space and time generate new struggles in such fields as esthetics and cultural representation [. . .] The ways a city imagines itself, represents itself, and materializes itself are not necessarily congruent.¹⁵ Cleavages and inconsistencies are common. Furthermore, Harvey, too, regards

the representation of the city as a problem around which a public sphere can form. These disjunctive images, he writes, produce tension, and, consequently, spark discursive struggles over representation debates over varying images of a place¹⁶

These discursive struggles over representation take place in city council meetings, real estate developers' offices, and in college classrooms, but they can, and do, and should, occur in urban planning and architectural design deliberations, too. And those deliberations often constitute a public sphere in which the swarming mass is an integral, contributing force. Planning the city, de Certeau says, involves both a theoretical and a practical element: to plan a city is both to think the very plurality of the real and to make that way of thinking the plural effective; it is to know how to articulate it and be able to do it.¹⁷ The best way to conceive of that plurality and to effect it in the city is to integrate the plurality into the process, to invite the public to contribute to the development of their city, and help them find themselves (their patterns of use, their values, their civic visions) reflected in the city's spaces. Strategies for involving the public will be addressed in the final section of the paper.

The public, understandably, has much invested in urban form and representation. Urban historian Thomas Bender argues that a city's crisis of representation is not only a political and economic crisis, but also a human one.¹⁸ A metropolitan region's ability to describe or represent itself determines its ability to foster the making of local publics.¹⁹ Therefore, the problem of urban representation not only threatens a city's marketability, but also has the potential to obfuscate its self-identity and endanger its public sphere. A city incapable of architecturally articulating and effecting the urban realities of its multiple publics de-legitimizes the experiences of those individuals who find the city inhospitable to their particular ways of practicing it. A city that fails to embrace plurality also fails to provide an inviting space for a truly inclusive public to form and to construct a public sphere an active, debating citizenry around public development projects. The health of a city's public sphere, then, depends in part upon the city's success in articulating plurality in its civic identity, and in representing that civic identity in the physical city, its urban morphology and architecture.

But according to Harvey, in many cities where officials and business leaders work to manage and finance their cities' growth, the active production of places with special qualities becomes an important stake in spatial competition between localities.²⁰ Cities strive to forge a *distinctive image* and to create an *atmosphere of place and tradition* that will act as a lure to both capital and people of the right sort.²¹ Cities must transform their abstract spaces into concrete places with distinctive characters and histories, and unique symbolic advantages. In Harvey's view, city-building and place-making seem to more closely resemble product

design or environmental engineering than an organic, human, public process. And it is precisely this production-oriented approach to urban representation that has proven so problematic for some development efforts in rapidly evolving city-regions. In this view, spatial production becomes a marketing effort, a means of cosmetically differentiating one space from another of imposing a new plan on a pre-existing public with practiced ways of inhabiting their physical space. But place cannot simply be engineered the way a consumer good is designed, manufactured, and marketed to a target audience of the right sort. Place, unlike a consumer product, has an organic component, a history, an ecosystem, and a social body, that inevitably shapes its form and social character.

Taking Stock of Civic Visions

Seattle's geography, conservative values, process-oriented politics, and parochial culture, one might assume, would mitigate against fast-paced, market driven change. This is not to mention the fact that for the past decade, at least, public space has ranked high on Seattle's public agenda. Yet virtuoso architects have had charge of most of the recent projects. In 1991, Robert Venturi offered the city a new art museum, but it met with a cool reception.²² Benaroya Hall, new home to the Seattle Symphony, opened in 1998, and Safeco Field, the Mariner's new ballpark, debuted the following year. Yet according to David Brewster, founder of the *Seattle Weekly*, the city's alternative newsweekly, most of these recent design projects, even those by big name, progressive architects, have consciously corrected course toward more client-driven, blending-in, easy listening structures.²³ Implicit in Seattle's reticence to embrace a bold architectural identity, may be a lack of sureness in the city's evolving urban identity as a whole.

Local author and journalist Matthew Stadler suggests a reason for this timidity.

Cities have imaginations, he writes in *The Stranger*, a local weekly publication, but Seattle, having outgrown past identities based on particular modes of production among them, Jet City, Queen City, and Latte Land lacks the means to reimagine the city.²⁴ Stadler prescribes an urban psychoanalysis to uncover the city's hidden conflicts, contradictions, and complexes. Seattle psychoanalyzed seems to reveal a city characterized more by paradox than by plurality. One journalist described Seattle as somewhat Janus-like, being both innovative and creative, and at the same time exceedingly conservative and backward-looking.²⁵ Another wrote: Seattle seems to want to be a big city, while retaining all of the small-town characteristics it has cherished for years.²⁶ Seattle was, and is, an optimistic but self-effacing city with a radical history, a city where wonderful things are happening, but they're happening too fast²⁷ Some critics draw a link between the city's patchy cultural evolution and its economic development, characterized by a series of booms and busts. This erratic economic growth might explain Seattle's

sporadic approach to development of the physical city.²⁸ Others suggest that the city's humility, its lack of tolerance for conceit, prohibits anything grand. Mark Hinshaw, director of urban design for LMN Architects and regular *Seattle Times* contributor, offers his explanation for the paradoxes that contribute to Seattle's representation problems:

Architecturally, Seattle is a very reticent city. Almost as if people are afraid to make a social blunder that might offend someone. Perhaps it is our Scandinavian heritage that sets us up for tidiness and order. Or, perhaps, we've been working so hard at becoming a cosmopolitan/commercial, cultural hub of the Pacific Rim that we've taken ourselves way too seriously. Maybe all that turgid praise in magazines like *Newsweek* and *Fortune* has given us a collective complex.²⁹

Also keeping the city's ego in check were a host of unique challenges; nineteen years of economic expansion created traffic jams, jacked up real estate prices, and raised anxiety among long-time residents who worried that the city had forgotten its working class roots and connection to its natural resources. These challenges were amplified by a recent series of calamities, from the 1999 World Trade Organization riots and Microsoft's antitrust lawsuit, to the dotcom downfall, the 2001 earthquake and drought, and the announcement in Spring 2001 that Boeing would be moving its headquarters to Chicago. The uncertainty resulting from these circumstances contributes to what Douglas Kelbaugh, former member of the University of Washington's architecture faculty and current dean of the architecture school at the University of Michigan, calls the Lesser Seattle Syndrome. The city has become so passionately moderate and resistant to making bold or visionary moves, [and] continues to hobble efforts to build a city that exceeds the sum of its parts.³⁰ The Lesser Syndrome seems to affect many cities that take pride in their modesty, or consider themselves unworthy of innovative design.

But then, in June of 2000, architect Frank Gehry unveiled his loud, multicolored, metallic, blob-like Experience Music Project, his tribute to Jimi Hendrix and rock-and-roll. Paul Allen, of Microsoft fame, provided the idea and the funding. The project, although certainly not blending-in, is indeed client-driven that is, Allen-driven architecture. Several other recent projects also offered the potential for bold design, and, like the Music Project, many inspired mixed feelings. British architect Terry Farrell has been working on a new aquarium, but the Nisqually earthquake and the economic recession have delayed project plans. The renovated Seattle Center, home to the Seattle Opera and Pacific Northwest Ballet, finished the first phase of its renovation and will begin the second phase of implementing its Master Plan in the fall of 2003. A new civic center features a new city hall designed by Bassetti Architects and Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, a new justice center designed by

locals NBBJ, a civic plaza, and a renovated Key Tower. And the new Seahawks Stadium and Exhibition Center opened in July of 2002. According to *New York Times* reporter R.W. Apple, Jr., though, all this activity unsettles the old guard, which is attached to the city's comfy old Beaux-Arts look.³¹ Local property developer Scott Surdyke asks, Does this new era represent the design standards we truly want, or are we merely engaged in a reactionary period in which we are desperately trying to reinvent our image, regardless of urban context?³² Hinshaw, too, wonders if the Seattle of the nineties might have been trying too hard to fit in with other global cities, to live up to the image of a cosmopolitan/commercial/cultural hub.³³ Perhaps, instead of balancing the local and the global, instead of consulting its public and embodying its plurality, the city has reinvented itself in a few visionaries' dream images. Such visionary images run the great risk of slighting the plurality, shutting out the public sphere, and ignoring the city's history and urban context, its home-grown character.

Thus, until recently, Seattle design has followed two seemingly contradictory trends: the timid and nondescript, and the audacious and aggressive. But there must be a way to find a balance—innovative design that respectfully challenges the public's expectations for their public realm, while seeming to arise naturally from the urban fabric. But how might design strategies incorporate a new understanding of Seattle's urban context?

Some critics regard an organically developing city as one that acknowledges its architectural, planning, and cultural histories and integrates regionally familiar stylistic or formal elements, elements which supposedly reflect a public's history and character. Surdyke urges Seattleites to ask themselves: Is there a quality or commonality that defines this region's built environment?³⁴ What regional elements can help to ground Seattle's developing cosmopolitan design consciousness? Critics have recognized the influence of both Northwest Native American and Japanese motifs on Seattle architecture and landscape design, and some local designers have used the region's indigenous cultures as a design or ethic source.³⁵ This Critical Regionalist approach to design celebrates a place's unique characteristics: its local climate, topography, and building materials; its nature; its sense of history; its craft traditions; and its ontological appreciation of space. Critical Regionalism is *not*, however, sentimental or nostalgic, and it is not, as Rem Koolhaas, designer of the city's new public library, joked, a matter of throwing in a few bear-skin rugs. Critical Regionalism implies tempered *respect* for the local character of a place.

A number of regional architects have put this relational or Critical Regionalist approach into practice in a variety of structures that relate to the city's character, its geography, its climate, etc. Steven Holl, a New York-based architect who is

originally from Seattle, has produced two well-received critical regionalist designs: the Chapel of St. Ignatius at Seattle University and the newly opened Bellevue Art Museum. Seattle-based Olson Sundberg Kundig Allen architects have also received local awards for their design of the Frye Art Museum. In addition, some designers make use of contextual materials, like stones and tiles that, upon contact with the region's abundant atmospheric moisture, darken or brighten to produce a desired aesthetic effect.³⁶ Many projects, including Holl's chapel and Koolhaas's new Seattle Public Library, use light, one of the area's precious natural resources, as an aesthetic or functional element of their designs. Koolhaas's library also takes advantage of the region's geography, promoting views of the nearby water and mountains. And many other designers employ an informal design style that suits the region's down-to-earth, outdoors-oriented lifestyle.

Traditionally, the public's attempts to articulate their civic visions have been based on a narrow definition of context, one that favors homogeneity, building buildings to mimic their neighbors. Stakeholders in the public realm would do well to reconsider what it means to reflect a sense of place. Is that sense defined by local history, values, and geography, or is place (context) now defined by global social, economic, political, and technological forces? Should design *reflect* its context the most conservative interpretation perhaps by employing Scandinavian aesthetic references or Japanese architectural details, or adding some totem poles to the foyer? Or should contextual design *exploit* its context, as Holl's and Koolhaas's designs have done, by capturing as much precious daylight as possible, by celebrating Seattle's drizzle, or by providing views of the region's splendid geography? Or should contextual design *enhance* the cityscape the boldest approach by introducing something original, visually exciting, and provocative, even if unlike its neighboring buildings? Bold contextual design needn't be constrained by nostalgic forms or any obligations to blend in with the neighbors. They can rather reflect the public's multiple visions of their city, through original stylistic elements and symbolic forms, and facilitate, through a case-by-case analysis of programmatic and circulation needs, the public's multiple ways of practicing urban space.

Even the practicing of space can be regarded as a contextual issue. Any critical urbanist design should take into consideration the local public's unique awarenesses of and practices in their urban space. In Seattle, spatial consciousness seems to resemble the feeling of immediate immensity, which Gaston Bachelard describes in his classic work, *The Poetics of Space*.³⁷ Bachelard's phenomenology is full of paradoxes and inconsistencies, like bounded infinities and nests of immensity, which are quite similar to Seattle's paradoxical senses of small town metropol[itanism] and cosmopolitan parochialism. Perhaps Seattle's planners, as Bachelard advocates, could use the plurality of Seattleites

beloved spaces as tools for analysis of the human soul, as examples of publicly meaningful, representative places.³⁸ Seattleites' individual dream visions of their city could help designers to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces and foster a better understanding of the organically evolving city, a city that is based on memories and aspirations and composed of individuals' experiences.³⁹ A periodic phenomenological analysis could help to keep Seattle's architecture grounded and responsive to local cultural values and individual urban practices.

A few programs already in existence in Seattle are dedicated primarily to orchestrating the city's image, shaping its representation, and ensuring its functionality. The Seattle Design Commission (SDC), founded in 1968, reviews proposed projects that involve city money, city land, or city right-of-way, to ensure that those projects adhere to certain standards of design excellence and livability. The criterion of livability indicates that the SDC recognizes that buildings must serve their publics; spaces must accommodate their occupants' spatial practices. And in 2001, CityDesign was created as a sister organization to SDC to facilitate communication between city departments and between public and private agencies. CityDesign's primary function is to proactively develop and maintain a cohesive design vision for the entire city.⁴⁰ CityDesign's challenge is to remember that cohesion needn't mean unity or homogeneity; a civic vision can cohere in its plurality, or by way of complimentary contrast.

And as the city periodically reevaluates its publics' spatial experiences, it could simultaneously reassess the functions and programs of certain kinds of buildings, and use those findings to produce spaces that better serve their publics. According to Kelbaugh, typology can provide an enduring, universal code of urban design, which he regards as a useful counterweight to the non-universality of critical regionalism:

If Critical Regionalism celebrates and reinforces what is unique and enduring, typology provides us with a connection to something bigger and more universal [. . .] If we are to design for both the individual and the group, if we are to express what is local and what is universal in our built environment, regionalism and typology must engage in continuous dialogue.⁴¹

A building type is a norm, an abstraction that allows for local design variation. It's what an airport terminal, whether in Canada or India, is *supposed* to look like, or what both the Australian and the Norwegian *expect* a gas station to look like. Of course the Australian structure and the Norwegian structure will feature distinctive design elements, but at least the Australian will be able to recognize the

Norwegian building as a gas station, and vice versa. If the buildings of a particular type conform to a particular scale and form, they rhyme with one another across boundaries of time and space. When the city hall in Seattle rhymes with the city hall in Tokyo, the global cities built environments become universally legible and understandable.

But is it ever likely that the city halls in Pyongyang and Seattle will approximate one another? There are cultural differences many potentially insurmountable, despite the homogenizing, leveling effect of globalization that complicate the universality of architectural type. Will a prison be read the same in Sweden and Iraq and the United States? Furthermore, should we be promoting, in the name of universal spatial legibility, the ubiquity of the American mall type and suburb plan? Similarly, the dynamic nature of building functions and the changing ways that publics use their buildings, compromise the endurance of type. Again, Seattle's public library provides an excellent example of an institution that, much for the better, has shed its traditional type that of the Beaux Arts Carnegie-era library for a more open, flexible, transparent, luminous, and vibrant type that better enables libraries to provide the services they offer today. The building form's ready mutability has served the institution well.

Thus, taking into consideration the dynamic and culturally determined nature of architectural type and spatial form, we might conclude that local publics would be best served not by an adherence to architectural type, but by a customized assessment of their particular needs, spatial practices, and ways of experiencing space. A building that conforms to a plurality of local uses and reflects a plurality of local preferences, no matter how *unlike* those local uses and preferences are from those of other towns and cities, seems a far better goal than achieving universal spatial legibility. The plurality will be better able to serve itself and see its civic visions reflected in a locally tailored building than in one that conforms to universal type. Furthermore, the rejection of type doesn't necessarily mean the rejection of legibility; a custom designed building need not prove incomprehensible to local residents or to outside visitors. To the contrary, a building that reflects its contemporary functions and character through its form and ornamentation will better communicate its roles than a building that adheres to traditional forms, whether or not those traditional forms accurately represent the roles of the modern institution. A traditional Beaux Arts library building, for example, a building constructed to conform to an architectural style and practice deeply rooted in particular Western cultural traditions, will most likely not be legible to an African or Middle Eastern visitor. Library function would be better communicated by a glass building which many recently constructed public library buildings are into which passersby can look, noting book stacks and computers and people reading. The notion of type, what a library building is supposed to look like, does little to promote bold and innovative, representative, functional urban spaces.

Involving the Public in Development, from Region to Neighborhood

Reconceiving the concepts of sense of place and architectural type requires an acknowledgement of the plurality that spaces must serve. And in order to reflect that plurality in urban spaces, development projects should be analyzed from a variety of viewpoints, and at multiple scopes and scales. Those involved in the Pacific Northwest's physical development have, for the past several decades, been working to develop strategies to manage development on both the micro and macro levels, and to reassess the scale and scope of public involvement in urban redevelopment. At the macro level, the Puget Sound region has created programs and legislation to delimit and define where, when, and how the region will grow. Kelbaugh and Hinshaw acclaim the Growth Management Act, passed in two parts in 1990 and 1991, which sets limits to regional growth and requires that all development be accompanied by corresponding infrastructure improvements.[42](#) Also praiseworthy is the Puget Sound Regional Council's VISION 2020 and Destination 2030, which provide a regional framework for growth management and economic and transportation development. VISION 2020 deals with eight development-related issues: urban growth areas; contiguous and orderly development; regional capital facilities; housing; rural areas; open space, resource protection and critical areas; economics; and transportation. Destination 2030 addresses the future of road, transit, ferry, rail, and other transportation systems.[43](#) These macro-level concerns ultimately impact individual methods of moving about and experiencing their city.

On a smaller scale, the 1999 Downtown Urban Center Neighborhood Plan (DUCPG) recognizes that, as the region develops, Seattle's downtown, a public more narrowly defined than the region, serves new functions. The downtown area in particular, with its concentration of public facilities and population and infrastructure, has great potential to represent to Seattle's individual residents their city's diversity, and to present a coherent vision of this developing city to the rest of the world. The downtown is one mid-scale representative space integral to the making of [the] local public.[44](#) As stated in the 1999 plan, the overall vision of the DUCPG is as follows:

The downtown Urban Center is a mosaic of residential and mixed use districts, regional cultural facilities, civic and retail cores. Within a preeminent urban center is the foundation for a vital Downtown. Respecting the unique identities of the five individual neighborhoods is as important as recognizing the powerful forces which drive a larger regional vision for Downtown. With this foundation in place, there is great potential to refine the art of living and working Downtown.[45](#)

The DUCPG echoes de Certeau's conviction that the physical city, and its downtown in particular, must embody the plurality of the practiced and lived city including its mixed uses, neighborhood characters, and scales of experience.

At a yet smaller scale, the establishment of a Neighborhood Planning Office (NPO) in 1995 indicated, according to Folke Nyberg of the University of Washington, the city's recognition of the *neighborhood* as the local foundation of political life and as a source of moral regeneration.⁴⁶ The NPO, which closed when it completed its four-year program, attempted to bring more citizens into the planning process, but critics claim that the process tended to marginalize low income residents and to privilege downtown interests over outer neighborhoods' interests. Karen Ceraso of *Shelterforce* magazine claims that such exclusivity was to be expected, considering the program's roots in NIMBYism (not-in-my-back-yard-ism)⁴⁷ The NPO originated when wealthy, single-family residents, concerned about property values and quality of life, reacted against attempts to create urban villages that would allow for increased housing density in certain neighborhoods.⁴⁸ The organization had allegedly represented similar interests throughout its entire existence, and its failure was, in part, its inability to effectively embrace plurality.

Checking the Influence of the Individual

Wealth has traditionally played a large role in determining any group or individual's influence over spatial forms. Although most of the city's efforts to coordinate and regulate the city's representation have been, for the most part, under the supervision of public organizations, in the late 1990s, when it came time to put these plans into action, the city often turned to the private sector for financing. Private-public partnerships, although hotly debated, steadily channeled Seattle technocrats' global capital into local projects. These individual funders illustrated the opportunities and challenges of involving the public at the individual level in development projects.

One such funder is Paul Allen, known to some as Seattle's Haussmann. His First & Goal Inc. owns the Seattle Seahawks, the Portland Trailblazers, and part of the new football stadium, while his Vulcan Northwest Inc. contributed to the renovation of Seattle's Union Station, now home to Sound Transit, and is to become headquarters to the light rail, commuter rail, and bus systems.⁴⁹ He is also responsible for the Rose Garden Coliseum in Portland; Seattle's Experience Music Project; and the renovated Cinerama Theater, which he frequented as a boy. The University of Washington library and the new Seattle Public Library have also benefited from Allen's generosity. And now he plans to transform Seattle's South Lake Union neighborhood. Allen rejects the idea that he has a grand vision for the city, claiming to be motivated by the desire to be fresh, to incorporate high technology, to do things in high quality ways.⁵⁰ Needless to say, Allen doesn't

seem to be suffering from the Lesser Seattle syndrome.

According to Alex Steffen, president of Allied Arts of Seattle, however, there s no reason for alarm: As far as having an 800-pound gorilla running around your city, he s a pretty amiable one [. . .] I mean, it s hard to be too outraged by someone who just loves sports and is kind of geeky in his devotion to Jimi Hendrix.[51](#) Yet Allen s projects are a potential challenge to the articulation of plurality in the cityscape; a large portion of Seattle s newly developed public space reflects the practiced space of one man. The projects may ultimately serve the public (Trailblazers and Hendrix fans, at least) but how much say did the public have in articulating those spaces? Granted, Allen deserves commendation for his contributions to the city; he has provided new cultural and entertainment venues and proven himself committed to even less glamorous infrastructural projects. Still, one has to wonder: what kind of a civic vision or ideology can emerge from a development plan driven by one man s personal tastes, private fantasies, and nostalgia?

I think most people see it as a boon, but there s also a concern about what will happen if someone can just buy up an area and do what they will, admits Marty Curry, executive director of the city planning commission.[52](#) In 1995 and again in 1996, Seattle voters rejected Allen s proposed Seattle Commons project, a park connecting the central business district to Lake Union. Kelbaugh chides the city for its shortsightedness: Rarely, maybe once a decade if you re lucky, is a civic gift of this magnitude offered up to the community [. . .] Probably never in Seattle s history, has so much citizen effort for a single project been spent in vain.[53](#) According to Kelbaugh, Seattle Commons exemplified pluralistic planning:

The Commons was an epic and noble effort at a middle course, at reviving the Seattle spirit in our politics. The proponents really did try to involve all sorts of different interests. They opened a Pandora s box of design-by-democracy, progress by consensus [. . .] The Commons, which could have been the great example of the democratic way to make tough decisions, has instead become Exhibit A in the case for governance by a hidden elite.[54](#)

At the same time, Allen is the elite, although not of the hidden kind, and, at the time, he embodied an escalating social tension. In 2000, Jonathan Raban wrote in *Architectural Record*, Seattle is small enough to be a pond in which a single multimillionaire can still make a big splash. With their new businesses and foundations, the retired cybercrats [. . .] are now pumping a lot of their money back into the city to which they came as poor strangers just ten or fifteen years ago.[55](#) In the 1990s, the tech millionaires marginalized Seattle s old establishment.

And these cybercrats, who were separated from the traditional middle class by an ever-widening gap, had immense power to shape Seattle's physical city. Bill Gates's \$109.5 million dollar, 66,000-square foot high-tech compound sprawls along the shore of Lake Washington, just outside the city, providing a highly visual, and rather unsightly, representation of cybercapital's imperial stamp on the landscape. Many Seattleites have confidently concluded that Gates' private home is utterly tasteless. But residents are left to wonder if Gehry's Experience Music Project, located in the public Seattle Center, and the new public library, funded in part by both Allen and Gates, are appropriate for the city. One Seattleite, responding to the city's then-new, chic W hotel, says, "It's nice, but is it really Seattle?"⁵⁶ This is the danger: that the public can't see itself represented in its city, when singular, powerful individuals take the place of a public sphere in design deliberations, when personal interests overpower public interest in the development of the physical city.

Engaging The Public Sphere

But perhaps most controversial aspect of defining who manage the city's transition and determining the hierarchical level at which decisions lie, is the decision of how, and where, the public sphere—a collective of individuals who, though unaffiliated with any official legitimating entity and unequipped with billion-dollar funding, still hold a stake in the development of the physical city should fit into the planning efforts. Kelbaugh calls for limitations to public involvement. He claims that Seattle's egalitarian zeal for endless process presents an obstacle to strong design.⁵⁷ Many design critics agree that overzealous attempts by process-oriented designers to hear every constituent's voice, and to reflect every shareholder's interest in the design, results in a lowest-common-denominator design solution. Furthermore, the layperson's comments are of limited utility because the general public can't be expected to get up to speed on complex design and development projects, and it would waste far too much time for city officials and those charged with the design to explain each step to an uninformed public. Our elected officials need to step up and make more of these major decisions, openly and bravely, Kelbaugh says, deliberation must be limited.⁵⁸ Former mayor Schell concurs: "Too often we reward those with the staying power to attend meetings. The door will remain open for everyone, but at some point we have to say it's time to get on with it."⁵⁹ Yet the plurality must be engaged in order to ensure the development of a vital public realm and the existence of a healthy public sphere. Public involvement gives individual citizens a sense of authorship and ownership of their city; it helps to make the city a safe, affirming place for individuals to engage in their particular urban practices. It is of course ridiculous to ask planners and designers to solicit public commentary on every decision in a planning project, and to put every issue to a public vote. But the public should be kept informed about design projects from early on, even before planning begins, and throughout the design process. Their

opinions on large scale matters, such as the functions, flow, and feelings of a space should be solicited in a systematic manner, and they should be dignified with a response, and, if possible, incorporated into the design. The public should be given opportunities to view models and plans at various stages of the design process; to test life-size models and mock-ups of design elements, to experience and practice these spaces; to speak with and ask questions of the design team. The disabled, in particular, are one group whose feedback is integral to the design of public spaces that are truly inclusive, that respond to a plurality of users. Design should be something that not only *seems* accessible, but also *depends upon* public access and contribution for its success.

The design for the Seattle Public Library (SPL), although by no means entirely civil or inclusive, provides an excellent model for a democratic, pluralistic design process. According to City Librarian Deborah Jacobs, the Library Board and the design team had a commitment from the beginning to present early ideas publicly in order to give everyone an opportunity to comment and be involved in the process. She continues: "It is more typical for an architect to wait until there is a more completed design before presenting anything to the public. We wanted to do things differently. We wanted to share the initial concept proposal to the community."⁶⁰ This early solicitation of public input bespoke, at least ostensibly, the SPL's commitment to public process through all stages of the design. The Library made every effort to spread the word far and wide, to invite every conceivable constituent artists, the disabled, non-English-speakers, businesspeople to attend public meetings, to participate in small group workshops, to become interested in and informed about the design. Even those who would not have otherwise spoken for themselves (the homeless, and young children, for example) were consulted either in person or through representatives. Citizens of varying socioeconomic status and race, from downtown loft dwellers and suburbanites who came downtown only reluctantly on weekends to frequent library-goers and locals who didn't even know there was a downtown library, all deserved and received equal attention in the library's planning. The challenge for the Library was then to make these people feel as if their comments were heard and incorporated into the new library building, *their* library building, a building in which they were *entitled* to hold a stake. In upcoming projects, CityDesign, although a new organization, could take the Library's process as a model and help to foster even more inclusive civic discourse about Seattle's development.

The activity of the public sphere is more than just talk; it's an integral component of urban planning. Successful planning, as de Certeau acknowledges, involves the thinking, articulating, and doing, or effecting, of a civic identity. Place-making requires a careful balancing of several key elements: public deliberation on the plurality of civic visions, the articulation of a vision that embraces that plurality, and the embodiment of that plurality in a physical landscape. That physical landscape

then depends upon the activity of the plurality the swarming mass to activate it. The city doesn't become a city without the activity of those publics that contribute to its creation.

Shannon Mattern is a Mellon Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in the History of Art Department at the University of Pennsylvania. She wrote her dissertation on the Seattle Public Library design process, and she is currently writing a book for the Smithsonian on several recent urban public library design projects.

1. For the purposes of this paper I will be using the term public to denote all those who are stakeholders in urban space, all those who effect and are affected by or who make and use of either functionally or symbolically, their urban spaces. It will also be important to note that for me, the vitality of a public is also dependent on that public's existence in the physical and symbolic space the city provides; the public needs a place to congregate in order to be a public.
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