

Livable Communities: A Multidisciplinary Dialogue on Designing a Sustainable Future



by Randolph Jones, AIA
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Participants acknowledged that our post-war, auto-reliant, sprawling development pattern is not sustainable: Energy costs, traffic congestion, vanishing greenfields, climate change, environmental disasters, and globalizing economies all point to a need to rethink where and how we grow. Lively discussions centered on:

- Social equity
- Community health
- Workforce housing
- Public transportation
- Land conservation
- Compact development
- Natural systems
- Heritage
- Culture
- Demographic shifts
- Global warming.

They also recognized and celebrated the vital role design plays in shaping our urban regions.

Universal principles; local applications

Participants discussed local differences—that what works in Chicago may not work in Seattle, Boston, or Raleigh—but agreed that the principles of livability and sustainability are universally applicable when it comes to urbanizing a region. When creating places for people, traditional zoning is out; mixed use is in. Just ask fellow conferees Seattle's City Councilor Peter Steinbrueck, FAIA; Chicago's Director of Policy Planning & Development Sam Assefa; or Bremerton's Mayor Cary Bozeman, whose vision is transforming the city's public waterfront.

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Livable communities can be supported by recapturing a sense of community, connectedness, and convenience through compact walkable develop-

ment, mixing of uses, and creating places for gatherings and celebration. This can be achieved through making streams pedestrian-accessible, restoring and protecting urban forests, developing heritage parks and museums, protecting local farmland and creating farmers' markets, creating mixed-use transit-oriented development, recapturing urban waterfronts, revitalizing aging downtowns, providing affordable housing and neighborhood schools, and planning events.

Thinking beyond green

Keynoter Neal Peirce, chair of Citistates and a syndicated journalist, challenged his audience to "think beyond Green," setting a broad-based agenda for recreating America's communities. His message was underscored in a later session entitled "Navigating the Political Landscape," when King County Council Member Dow Constantine offered designers a useable "framework for conversation" when engaging with elected officials. Understanding the "language" of design is important to politicians engaged in smart growth, natural resource management, transportation, and capital facilities issues. Architects can and should play a valuable role in the dialogue.



NEWS HEADLINES



Participants formally acknowledged support of AIA Seattle's position for removing the unstable Alaskan Way Viaduct, the elevated highway paralleling the downtown's central waterfront. A recent study by the Center for Neighborhood Technology, presented at the conference, demonstrated that traffic could be redistributed across a replacement surface arterial and adjoining streets network.

Seattle: The ideal urban venue

Seattle provided the ideal venue for exploring the intersecting themes and scales of livable and sustainable communities. It exhibits enlightened political leadership; activated citizenry; visionary long range planning; innovative yet pragmatic action agendas; close connections between living, working, and recreation throughout the region; active port/shipping activity; emerging urban villages; booming construction activity including reuse, renovation, and new, dense mixed use; an unparalleled urban farmers market bringing local produce and adding vibrancy to downtown; a new world-class public library; a demonstrable human presence in downtown; and a waterfront dominated by walkers, bikers, strollers, families, visitors, and residents; and the list does not end there.

As AIA Seattle's President-elect Lee Copeland, FAIA, noted, "Seattle residents can live, work, and play without going anywhere." That's an enviable

position, and one that is certainly achievable by rediscovering America's traditional urban regions through design solutions.

Reference:

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Photos by the author.

"America at the Livable Communities: Walking, Working, Water," the most recent annual Livable Communities conference, was sponsored by the AIA Regional and Urban Design Committee, Center for Communities by Design, Committee on the Environment, Housing and Custom Residential Committee, and Young Architects Forum; AIA Seattle; USDA Forest Service; and AARP.

For a local perspective, read AIA Seattle's report by Marga Rose Hancock, Hon. AIA. [www.aiaseattle.org/news_060926_wwwreport.htm]