

# Making Better Places: Ten Resolutions for Mayors

By Jeff Speck

The world's cities are changing every day. Some are becoming better places to live, some worse. Cities improve or worsen as a result of many intersecting forces, but if any one person has the ability to lead this change—or at least exert an influence—it is the American mayor.

One of the best unheralded programs of the National Endowment for the Arts is the *Mayors' Institute on City Design*. For almost twenty years, this group has been putting mayors together with designers to rethink the shape of their cities. After eighteen months working with this program, a number of design truisms that I once understood mostly in theory have become painfully obvious in practice. That many of these items are common sense does not alter the fact that mayors every day make decisions large and small that violate them outright. So, for all the mayors today who want to make better places, and for the citizens who want to help, I offer the following ten City Design Resolutions for the New Year. Those who wish to call them commandments are welcome to do so.

## 1. Design Streets for People.

What attracts people to cities? For most, it is the *public realm*, with the vibrant street life that phrase implies. A successful public realm is one that people can inhabit comfortably on foot. Unfortunately, most cities today still allow their streets to be designed by traffic engineers who ignore the real needs of pedestrians. For example, parallel parking, essential to protecting people on the sidewalk, is often eliminated to speed the traffic. Every aspect of the streetscape, including lane widths, curbs, sidewalks, trees, and lighting can be designed to the needs of either cars or people. Too many cities favor the former.

## 2. Overrule the Specialists.

Engineers are not alone in their quest to shape the city around specialized needs. The modern world is full of experts who are paid to ignore criteria beyond their profession. But the specialist is the enemy of the city, which is by definition a general enterprise. The school and parks departments will push for fewer, larger facilities, since these are easier to maintain. The public works department will insist that new neighborhoods be designed principally around snow and trash removal. The department of transportation will build new roads to ease traffic generated by the very sprawl that they cause. Each of these approaches may be correct in a vacuum, but is wrong in a city. Cities need generalists like mayors to weigh the advice of specialists against the common good.

## 3. Mix the Uses.

Another key to active street life is creating a 24-hour city, with neighborhoods so diverse in use that they are occupied around the clock. Eating, shopping, working, socializing—these activities are mutually reinforcing and flourish in each other's presence. Moreover, many businesses such as restaurants and health clubs rely on both daytime and evening traffic to cover their rent. When considering the future of any city district, the first step should be to ask what uses are missing. In many downtowns, the answer to that question is housing, and cities from Providence to San Diego can point to new housing as a big part of a recent turnaround. In *Up from Zero*, Paul Goldberger is dead-on in bemoaning the main error of the World Trade Center planning process, its failure to introduce any housing into those sixteen commercial acres.

#### **4. Hide the Parking Lots.**

If they are to keep walking, pedestrians must feel safe, comfortable – and entertained. And nothing is more boring than a parking lot. Whether they are open-air or six-stories tall, parking lots must be banished along any street that hopes to attract walking. Happily, parking lots are easy to hide. It only takes a 20-foot-thick crust of housing or offices to block a huge lot from view, and new parking structures can easily be built atop ground-level shops. Smart cities across the country are putting these requirements into law. Is yours?

#### **5. Small is Beautiful.**

People are small, and the most walkable cities acknowledge this fact with small blocks, small streets, small buildings, and small increments of investment. Portland owes much of its success to its tiny blocks that create an incredibly porous network of streets, each of which can be quite small as a result. Whether for the mega-block housing schemes of the sixties or the cul-de-sac craze of the eighties, most cities that have closed streets in the past now wish they hadn't. Building height is another place for smallness. Only in the densest cities, where land doesn't sit empty as parking lots, are tall buildings justified. Otherwise, allowing skyscrapers just causes a few lucky sites to become overbuilt while their neighbors all lay fallow under massive speculation. Limiting building heights is also a useful bargaining chip: only with a height limit in place can height bonuses then be offered as an incentive for other concessions. Finally, a healthy real-estate development community is one of chipmunks, not gorillas. Do not tie the fate of your city to a single corporate juggernaut with its silver-bullet megamall when you should instead be leading the way for the local investor who wants to renovate a rowhouse.

#### **6. Save That Building.**

How many buildings do we need to tear down before we learn our lesson? Almost every city that deeply regrets the 1960s destruction of its 1900s structures is happily permitting the 2000s destruction of 1940s structures. Need the march of time only confirm our current ignorance? Historic preservation may be our best way to respect our ancestors, but it is justified on economic terms alone. Don Rypkema reminds us that in market economies, it is the differentiated product that commands a monetary premium. This is why cities like Savannah and Miami Beach can point to historic preservation as the key ingredient in recent booms. It isn't always easy to find a productive use for an empty old building, but tearing it down makes that outcome impossible. In these cases, remember the old adage: "don't do something; just stand there!"

#### **7. Build Normal (Affordable) Housing.**

Affordable housing remains a crisis in most cities, but the solution is not to build more housing projects. Rather, to be successful, affordable housing must do two things: be integrated with market rate housing, and look like market-rate housing. The most effective affordability programs combine housing with preservation by building city-owned houses on "missing tooth" empty lots in struggling historic neighborhoods. These houses provide smaller-than-standard apartments, but they are stylistically compatible with their neighbors. Despite the best-intentioned efforts of three generations of architecture students, affordable housing is exactly the wrong place to pioneer new design styles. Experiment on the rich; they can always move out.

#### **8. Build Green / Grow Green.**

People have been talking about sustainable architecture for decades, but that movement has finally hit the tipping point with the advent of the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED standards. There

is no longer any excuse for not building green. LEED stands for *Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design*, and the standards allow a building to become certified as *sustainable* in terms of its resource use and interior health. It costs a little bit more to build green, but these costs are made up quickly in energy savings and worker productivity. Chicago and Seattle are two of many cities that now require all municipal buildings be LEED certified. Does yours? Oh, and while we're on the subject of green: Plant more trees! If mayors understood the correlation between tree cover and real estate value, our cities would look like forests.

### **9. Question your Codes.**

A “dingbat” is an apartment house on stilts floating above an exposed parking lot. The construction of one dingbat on a street of elegant rowhouses is enough to send property values plummeting. Why, then, do most city codes make no distinction between rowhouses and dingbats? Conventional zoning codes, made up of incomprehensible statistics like *floor area ratios*, ignore the differences between pleasant and unbearable urbanism. More often than not, they also make a city's traditional urban form—short front setbacks and mixed uses—illegal to emulate. For these reasons, a new generation of design ordinances is gaining favor among planners. Called *form-based codes*, these ordinances regulate what really matters: a building's height, disposition, location, and where it puts the parking. These codes actually have pictures in them—imagine! Cities including Arlington, Virginia, and Miami are creating form-based codes for key neighborhoods. Governor Schwarzenegger just signed a bill encouraging form-based codes in California. What does the Arnold know that your city doesn't?

### **10. Don't Forget Beauty.**

Charleston Mayor Joe Riley reminds us that cities should be places that make the heart sing. For many of our citizens, especially those too poor or infirm to travel, the city is an entire world. For this reason, it is our responsibility to create and maintain cities that not only function properly, but also afford moments of beauty. Yet how many communities today routinely award to the lowest bidder their contracts for schools, parks, and government buildings, the only investments that belong to us all? In the interest of short-term parsimony, we cheat ourselves out of an honorable public realm and a noble legacy. This did not use to be the case, and it need not continue. Many of the nation's most beautiful buildings and parks were built during periods of unparalleled adversity. It should not take another depression to make civic structures lovely again.

Cities are the largest and most complex things that we humans make. Despite evidence to the contrary, the knowledge exists on how to make them well. To the mayors—and citizens—who want to create better places: please start here.

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