

Communities By Design, a
nonprofit 501c(3) training and education
organization, in cooperation with the
City of Redwood City,
is pleased to present:

The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN



UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF GREAT PLACES

2005-06 SEASON: FORUM #6
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 1, 2006
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On March 1, 2006, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit "Communities By Design" hosted the sixth presentation of the 2005-2006 Forum season, with a presentation by Donlyn Lyndon, FAIA. Mr. Lyndon is the Editor of the journal "PLACES," a member of the Urban Places Design Group and Eva Li Professor Emeritus at the UC Berkeley College of Environmental Design. Mr. Lyndon spoke on "Unlocking the Secrets of Great Places."

Space Remembered

Donlyn Lyndon defines place as "space that can be remembered." A sometimes slippery and elusive concept, a "place" has a set of tangible capacities that grab hold of the mind. According to Mr. Lyndon, "Our lives engage place in many, many ways. We bring out thoughts and experiences to places and we attach memories to them." In his discussion about "Unlocking the Secrets of Place," Mr. Lyndon shared some of the qualities a place must possess in order to transform it from merely a locality to a memorable experience.

Human Experience

The scale of a given place, although difficult to measure, must be brought down to the human level. The buildings of Pienza, Italy are inscribed all over with the scale of the human. Each window, each door and every bench are evidence of people and therefore should be used unsparingly. Effective architecture is not just about architecture, but is about the ways in which people live in this place. "What makes a great urban place," according to Mr. Lyndon, "is the presence of people amplified."

Respect for Nature

Also important is "the presence of nature transformed." Mr. Lyndon believes that it is necessary to keep the signs of function and use exposed within the city. For example, when we allow a stream to run through a downtown, instead of burying it below the surface, we bring life to an area and remind ourselves of our own existence.

In a city, we need reminders of the greater context, of the environment that houses the city. Great places often have well-framed, grand views of the landscape beyond, such as mountains, valleys, and rivers. Mr. Lyndon suggests that the presence of nature might be expressed through an allowed response to the natural landscape such as an exaggerated slope of a plaza surface that makes one conscious of the earth.

History and Improvisation

Just as we should not erase traces of the natural setting, so must we also avoid erasing the history of a place, cautions Mr. Lyndon. A city should be open to and celebrate the passage of time. Mr. Lyndon recommends paying attention to the historic resources, to the nature of the town, and finding ways to reintroduce people to their town.

"Invention can occur with destruction," Mr. Lyndon remarked as he showed images of New Orleans following the hurricane. It is important to establish the authority and reverence to what is already there, to make a good transition between old and new, to continue the same rhythm.

The process of time is better aided when room is left for improvisation and appropriation. Allowing café tables to be placed in alleyways, or a vendor to locate beneath an ancient temple, are some flexible adaptations that can make a place more active and interesting.

*"Great places don't
happen, they become."
– Donlyn Lyndon*

Interaction and Relationships

We can begin to make places more memorable by structuring a variety of encounters, suggests Mr. Lyndon. Both the Lovejoy Fountain in Portland and the Monterey Museum of Art were successful at creating series of spaces that allow for exploration and interaction with form.

Mr. Lyndon recommends that the treasures of a place be showcased in a clear and distinct manner. "The sublime is always present, you just to make yourself available" to it, says Mr. Lyndon. The Monterey Bay Aquarium provides an excellent stage for nature, architecture and human interactions.

Draw relations across space by using elements such as landmarks and gateways to delineate and make smooth transitions to from place to place. It is equally valuable to draw on relations across time. According to Mr. Lyndon, we should respect the character and structure of the community and insert what is need into the existing. It is not as important that new buildings look like the others, but that they look like the "place." A building is not about being a building in and of itself, but is about shaping the space.

Ongoing Care and Investment

Cities need to have the determination to get things right, says Mr. Lyndon. One component of this is that a community must invest in maintenance and improvements that reveal constant care. Attention to detail, as well as the allowance of constant evolution, ensures continual interest in a given place. Mr. Lyndon recommends finding new ways for people to

see the street, for example; one way that this can be done is by planting a row of trees along the sidewalk.

Access and Diversity

Also important is embedding activities of various sorts to ensure a multiplicity of access. Events make a place memorable, just as place makes events memorable. The biggest ingredient to this concept is to fill the city with public access facilities. “We are becoming increasingly, marvelously diverse,” says Mr. Lyndon. “A great downtown is where everyone knows they belong.”

“A great downtown is a magnetic force – it draws people to it.”
– Donlyn Lyndon