

Sustainable Urban Landscapes

THE SURREY DESIGN CHARRETTE

A Project of the
University of British Columbia
James Taylor Chair in Landscape
and Liveable Environments

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Foreword by Doug Kelbaugh
Essay by William R. Morrish

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In the "last but not least" category are the team leaders and students who actually produced all of the drawings contained in this book. A listing of the team leaders, with short biographies, can be found in the appendix. They are living proof that you can be over forty and still stay up all night working to deadline. The pictures of all of the student participants (except for those who somehow slipped out when the shutter was snapped) and their names are featured at the beginning of each design section. Again, many thanks to these students for bringing fresh ideas to the project and for challenging the team leaders to reach for the best and most sustainable solutions possible.

Doug Kelbaugh, FAIA, Professor of Architecture & Urban Design at the University of Washington not only participated in the charrette and provided the Foreword for this publication, he was also our advisor during the planning and design-programming phase. Thank you Professor Kelbaugh for all of your helpful ideas.

Finally, a special thanks to the Design Center for the American Urban Landscape at the University of Minnesota. We thank the Design Center, and Catherine Brown and William Morrish in particular, for bringing the words *design*, *urban*, and *landscape* together. Due to their efforts, not only are the words coming together, but so, it seems, is the practice of urban landscape design.

FOREWORD

What is a design charrette? The short answer is that it is an illustrated brainstorm. A longer answer emerged for the University of British Columbia (UBC) last September, when its Landscape Architecture Program hosted a five-day intensive workshop. Four competing teams of students, led by design professionals, developed different design solutions for a new town site in Surrey, where they presented them at a well-attended public review. Distinguished team leaders, representing the disciplines of architecture and landscape architecture, were recruited both locally and from all over the continent. A charrette typically deals with an urban design issue of social and civic importance. It is meant to provide community clientele with feasible but creative solutions to pressing issues, as opposed to providing faculty and students with a theoretical or pedagogic exercise. There are three basic types of charrettes: (1) those that test new public policies or design ideas on real sites, (2) those that respond to requests for help from neighbourhood groups or government agencies, and (3) those that initiate unsolicited proposals for a glaring problem or opportunity presented by a specific site. Some charrettes are hybrids, such as those that test a new idea on a site that is under-utilized. The UBC charrette combined all three types in that it tested government policies on an under-developed site at the request of the City of Surrey. This alone is an ambitious and significant undertaking.

Why hold a charrette? The answer is that, in their formative stages, the planning efforts for a region need the benefit of creative physical design. Neighbourhoods, towns, cities, and regions should not be planned, or even zoned, according to abstract policies and non-visual formulae drafted by lawyers, lawmakers, and bureaucrats who have not enlisted the help of design professionals. Such methods have led to zoning codes as thick as telephone

books and as difficult to decipher as tax regulations. Often these land-use and zoning codes prohibit - sometimes on purpose, sometimes inadvertently - making a traditional town or neighbourhood. To build anything resembling a "High Street" or "Elm Street" in many North American municipalities is now actually against the law! Designing a region, like designing a building, should not be done *ex novo*; it is an interactive process that needs to illustrate and to test proposed policies and laws in three dimensions before adopting them. It is not only a question of designers and planners validating policy and laws; it is also very much a question of design-informing policy. Design is more than a service to be bought by the pound or by the hour and plugged in at the end of a problem-solving process. It is too powerfully integrative and formulative to be withheld until policy and program are in place. Design charrettes can brainstorm a problem in a way that liberates latent and inevitable possibilities. It can reveal what a project's site and program want to be as well as illustrate what special interest groups and stakeholders desire. Because the design charrette looks at a problem holistically, the results are not likely to fall prey to specialized thinking and political tinkering. Charrettes kill many birds with one stone: they help the community solve problems and build consensus; they test new ideas and policies that are generated within the community, the design professions, or the university; they seize on forgotten places and nascent possibilities; they build according to how the community understands itself; they bring to town and to campus leading designers that would otherwise be unaffordable; and they stir and bring together faculty and students while putting to good use university resources and expertise. To boot, they do all these things economically. By sponsoring this event, the UBC Landscape Architecture Program has made good use of its financial resources and its intellectual capital.

Having organized and participated in over a dozen charrettes, I can attest that this charrette was both very well organized and productive. The participants were sent a well-conceived and well-written programme, with background information, in advance of the event. All the key parties - an impressive array of citizens and officials - were in Surrey for the initial briefing before touring the site by bus. Large multi-disciplinary teams worked and shared food under the same roof for five days. Each team was equipped with the expertise, the tools, and the judgment to make the long

knowledge, there were more team leaders involved in this than in any previous charrette – four highly qualified design professionals on each team. That is a lot of design horsepower. Like all charrette deadlines, the Friday public presentation ensured that decisions would not be postponed, as they tend to be in normal work schedules while awaiting input from other parties.

The teams accomplished a remarkable amount of work in a remarkably short period. Like all charrettes, it was short-lived and sometimes subject to wrong turns or the truncated kind of thinking which is forced upon one by a clock that ticks much faster than normal. Fortunately, all the teams came up with strong ideas around which to coalesce their designs. The results, as always, were at the same time refreshingly unpredictable and comfortably assuring. The chemistry of both collaboration among teammates and friendly competition between teams unleashed ideas that would have possibly been overlooked in slower-paced, more linear approaches to design. Like all charrettes, the collective energy - at times rife with confusion - gave rise to fertile creativity. Adrenaline always generates bad ideas as well as good ones, and the results of this compressed and febrile creativity must now be widely and carefully reviewed. The charrette process, by its very nature, tends to encourage a no-holds-barred approach to design. Because design teams focus on a single place and want to make sure all the cards are played, they are sometimes loath to leave out any promising or imaginative ideas. Consequently, designs sometimes become too elaborate and optimistic. On the other hand, a charrette represents a given site's moment in the spotlight and should not be overly shackled by normal budgetary and legal constraints. In any case, many ideas must now be edited by the many different constituencies, and those that survive then need to be reworked and refined. This book is an invitation to join that ongoing process.

For Patrick Condon and the other organizers and participants, what underlies this book is a deeper worry: a fundamental dissatisfaction with and alarm over the direction that metropolitan development has taken in recent decades. This is equally true in my city of Seattle. In both regions, growth has rapaciously consumed the natural environment and diminished the human community. The citizens of Greater Vancouver and/or of Seattle may disagree on what is possible for their respective futures; however, there is a growing understanding that we cannot continue to spread ourselves

endlessly across the countryside, to live by and for our automobiles, to produce tons of waste and pollutants for every man, woman, and child. We are sucking up all our planet's energy and natural resources, and we are letting our established communities wither. This charrette, however, and the James Taylor Chair in Landscape and Liveable Environments, radiates a fundamental optimism. They declare that we can restore, integrate, humanize, and diversify both the built and the natural environment. Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute has said that sustainability has a better chance of working in our region than anywhere else in the industrialized world. If we can't achieve the proper balance between the built and natural environment, between public and private, and between growth and stability, then perhaps no region can. To not at least try is to follow Los Angeles and Jakarta into the abyss. The James Taylor Chair and the fruits it will bear are predicated on the belief that the right land use, the right transportation system, the right design, at the right scale, will go a very long way towards solving society's problems. To be sure, these strategies cannot solve all our problems in one fell swoop; on the other hand, there is neither the time nor the money to solve them one at a time. It is clear that any solutions will require comprehensive policies and designs - the kind that you will read about in this book.

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