

# THEMES, DIMENSIONS & CONTRIBUTING LESSONS

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## **TOWARDS THE CITY AT EYE LEVEL**

When over viewing the contributions in this book, an interesting set of values comes to mind in relation to the different actors in the 'city at eye level'. First there is planning: the forward thinking into the future related to the way we build and develop our cities and streets now. Next is ownership: the balance between what is desirable and profitable in the point of view of the investors and entrepreneurs in the short- and the long-term. Another level is smart development: the art of managing the city in cooperation with stakeholders to enhance urban quality (research, experience, and exchange of knowledge as a shared goal). We also have the idea of a 'sense of place': an attitude and understanding of the context and dynamics of a street from all types of observers (the city watchers, researchers, insiders). Last is the force of design, shifting from aesthetics (how things look) to the experience of the city (how things work). These aspects are interwoven and should not be discussed separately. Last but not least people are living in the city: they use the city at eye level and give it certain shared meanings over time. Their appreciation is finally the proof of the pudding.

## **WHAT PLANNING CAN DO**

City planning is an ever-changing field, due to a greater uncertainty and complexity in societies today. More than object-based developments, iconic architectural expressions, and slow-moving structural plans,

the dynamics, existing quality, and energy in the city are nowadays the focus for city improvement. What city dwellers experience on the streets and in their daily routines, influences social and economic assets and meanings of cities. Planning is becoming more about cooperation, exchanging knowledge, and defining roles in processes. An important reason for this shift is the dwindling financial resources of governments. Long term ambition and direction of city development should find new connections with a growing cloud of initiatives by people and businesses overseeing their domain of interest. In light of the current economic crisis and demanding environmental and quality concerns for urban areas, this new approach for planning is necessary.

Understanding the city at eye level is a relatively underdeveloped field in the shifting planning approach. A new body of knowledge can be gained from deliberate trial and error projects that are connected to different communities in the city: see what happens, see if it works, create new innovations, and set a new standard. This style of planning demands an exchange of long-term perspectives and short-term experiences. Planning should especially focus on transition and reset rather than addition and growth, because the amount of needed functions for good plinths (shops, restaurants, services etc.) is limited.

## **WHAT DEVELOPMENT CAN DO**

There is a difference between city development in a spontaneous and organic way, and development along planning schemes and project development. From the point of view of the consumer, the people who use the city at eye level on a frequent basis, city streets should be developed and managed on the level between private interest and public exposure. This approach concerns vacancy management, temporary use, and community involvement. Past efforts prove that an added value can be gained that would not occur on a purely market driven basis. The mission is to convince participants and to fill the gap between the short horizon of entrepreneurs and the long term of possible profits.

## **WHAT OWNERSHIP CAN DO**

Single or multiple ownership of real estate is an essential and qualifying characteristic for streets and plinths. A mix of businesses, operating at various hours throughout the day, evening, and night is what people expect from a vibrant city that they want to use all the time. What ownership can do is related (within the legal framework of contracts) to the rent and differentiations in turnover of shops. Single ownership of real estate and managing power in a street, can realise a long-term strategy and can adjust to changing circumstances. But this often lacks the spontaneous buzz and interventions in 'real' lively streets. On the other hand the task for multi-owned city streets is to provide safety, hospitality and comfort. Both models are important to learn from.

## WHAT A GOOD 'SENSE OF PLACE' CAN DO

Initiatives, ideas, and ambitions of local and global businesses contribute to the quality of the city at eye level. On one hand unique, often small-scale shops and start-ups give a street a certain vibe, or '*couleur locale*'. They seek up-and-coming streets not too far from the city centre or 'edgy' neighbourhood core. On the other hand, there are the global brands, which require a certain amount of space to create a flagship store and emphasize a brand and a lifestyle experience. These brands look for prime locations that offer high consumer density and impact. We have to foster both types of businesses because they attract new people and keep people coming back for more. In between the local street shops and the global brand flagship stores, is the small scale, so called 'warm' city - fit for strolling around. Here is the creative and experience economy flourishing in breakfast bars, galleries, pubs and coffee corners, parks and streets.

Local as well as global players are thinking and investing from the perspective of the sense of place, an idea about location, position in the traffic patron, densities of the streets, and appeal on public. The struggle is to fit all the pieces of the puzzle into one city and attend to each neighbourhood's specific sense of place and identity. Historic cities with a 'warm' sense of place will have problems to fit in the modern large scale shopping- and entertainment formulas, while the cities with a 'modern' sense of place mostly lack the small-scale streets needed for small businesses and a cosy atmosphere.

## WHAT DESIGN CAN DO

City planning and design has been driven by very different motives over time, shifting from supplying vast amounts of social housing to providing infrastructure for the automobile due to large-scale business parks, shopping malls and transit places. Now we see a new transition to network- and knowledge-based cities—the most complicated of urban forms yet.

Over the decades, design has contributed to the themes of city development: functionalism as a way of modern life, social issues in housing and public space, the image of the city in high rise and city icons, and recently to environmental issues and the quality of the existing city. The 'city at eye level' is a new theme that contributes to relationship between buildings and streets, and to the impact of high rise development on street level experience. It is a new and different 'commissioner' in urban design: ground level improvements, way-finding, public space, green space, and temporary use. This encapsulates a design shift from a bird's-eye view to a street-level view, and from an impact-oriented perspective to a user-based perspective.