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The Images of Commonplace Living in Modern City Regions

Real estate and land provide widely accepted and accessible images of most urban regions, standing alone, they limit our ability to comprehend the contemporary image climate of our increasingly complex metropolitan lives.

Movement is the essence of our urban existence. The economy of any city region requires unending flows of goods, energy, and people for its sustenance. Thus we wish to call attention to the images that the city region presents of people and property in motion.

The movement and associated images that we wish to focus upon address four inescapable activities of human life: the journey to work, gathering food, getting clothing, and finding a home. Having closely examined three areas in the Minneapolis-St. Paul Metropolitan Statistical Area, four characteristics of these associated images stand out:

- 1) The images of commonplace urban living are quite similar across the entire city region.
- 2) Most of the time the images are experienced by an individual moving about alone, not as a group experience.
- 3) Spatially the Twin Cities MSA bounds the daily journey to work, and errands for food and clothing, but many of the region-wide images are national packages, not confined to the Twin Cities region.
- 4) The pace of change in real estate is rapid. But unlike the other images of common living, the real estate market is highly fragmented.

To present our material we have selected three residential neighborhoods that match today's urban labels of center city, inner ring suburb, and outer ring suburb. None are places in crisis, and in their ordinariness they represent the Twin Cities MSA very well.

The center city neighborhood, Seward, is two miles from the downtown. The inner ring suburb, Roseville, grew up immediately north of St. Paul, primarily from 1950-1980. It is centrally located between the two downtowns. The outer suburb, Eden Prairie, is 20 miles from downtown Minneapolis.

Like the metropolitan region itself, all of these places are predominantly white. The principle social differences among the three areas concern household income, home ownership, and the ages of residents.

[a series of slides showing what a person would see moving through these three neighborhoods.]

Even a brief survey of three characteristic American urban places, turns up solid clues for those concerned with opportunities for urban designers. The pace of change that is revealed constitutes an opportunity in itself. The direction of change in our three urban places has oscillated between two poles. On the one end residential areas have accommodated themselves to the varying ways of business. At the same time the practices of business have trimmed to the tastes and demands of home owners.

In our inner city example, Seward, a neighborhood of the 1880-1930 era, the railroad and the streetcar set its transportation geometry. The alleys and their garages, however, show the neighborhood's response to the new opportunities of automobility.

In Roseville, the automobile shifted the development from the old North-South streets of St. Paul to the new interstates. At the same time the interstates made possible the creation of the regional shopping center, the gathering of dozens of stores and services. The automobile encouraged, perhaps even demanded, new relationships in the design of homes.

In Eden Prairie the tendency for domestic amenity to teach and discipline commercial and industrial ways has continued with the multiplication of domestic landscaping.

A review of these three places makes it perfectly clear that urban land and buildings imagery has set strongly toward using greening, lawn, shrubs, flowers, and trees as a standard for good urban practice.

If this trend can be taken as representative of national tendencies, what does it say to designers?

Opportunity lies where it has always been. The houses and buildings that cover the urban landscape are by no means the safest, most suitable to their tasks and activities, nor the most comfortable that ingenuity can devise.

Moreover, the new suburbs, like the old city before them, are far from achieving the fitness they could to the natural systems of the city region.

They suggest as well the possibilities of design improvement at every level. If we read the images correctly, they have been moving steadily in the direction of making urban elements safer, cleaner, and more in conformity to the standards Americans have sought in their domestic life.

Comments, Questions, and Answers

Q: Is Seward considered an inner city?

A: Yes, in Minneapolis it is. They consider themselves inner city. This isn't inner-city Detroit, but they do have some low-income families, they've lost jobs, and they have problems. It's not dense though. Minneapolis is more common in America than New York. It is inner-city by distance, age, and class history.

Q: You implied that people think they're different but then you say not.

A: We don't know exactly. Probably reputation and stereotype have something to do with it. Income is different.

Seward residents walk and bike and see themselves as different from everyone else. Everyone thinks they're special.

C: Maybe we don't generate image from the physical environment, but from other issues.

Q: Your paper started with a quote about communications, but you didn't address it.

A: There is commonality of image across neighborhoods. Cars link the neighborhoods but there is no communication.

C: Or maybe it's just not visible.

Q: The residential images look similar between neighborhoods, but the commercial area looks quite different.

A: They used to, but those corner stores in Seward no longer exist. You have to drive to a store.

Q: Is the travel distance the same?

A: Yes, but people don't necessarily work in their communities.

Q: In the images you've shown, are they the product of metropolitan planning or an innovative planner?

A: The metropolitan district planning board redistributes infrastructure investment, but the influence of Harry McKnight has disappeared.

Q: Last week we looked at images of places exclusively from the air. Today they were exclusively from the street. Do you think they'd look different from the air?

A: Yes, the scale is different and the neighborhoods would look different.

C: I'm struck by how similar the images are. There seems to be suburbanization of the city, rather than urbanization of the suburbs.

A: We've struggled to try and get developers to build developments for people to walk, but they say that the bankers won't let them.

Q: Have we been looking at the wrong cities if most American cities look like the ones we saw today?

A: Maybe. We're working on a project about redefining vocabulary of the city.

C: The streets may be very different. It's also worth looking at the scale and the perceived density.

A: In the mid-west, density is a four-letter word. Perceived density is a tricky, but important issue.

Q: Do garden apartments exist because there's edge city employment?

A: Yes. Unemployment is 2% and getting employees is difficult. The developer of the industrial park probably had a hand in getting the housing built.

Q: You said that people moved a lot. How does that change the story? Are the stories staying the same? How is the story or image of the neighborhood generated?

A: The stories stay the same. Not everyone moves. There are lots of people who are long-term residents. And there's the community paper too that contributes.

Q: What about marketing?

A: Market is not that necessary. If you come to Minneapolis because of a corporate move, you'd almost automatically go to Eden Prairie because that's where you're sent.

A: We've also had an influx of southeast Asians and Somalis come to live in Roseville and Eden Prairie.

Q: Have you looked at and compared the leisure or non-work activities between communities?

A: We didn't look at it specifically, but Eden Prairie has a huge sports center, and Seward has inline skating. There is a difference in sports. People who buy sports tickets are more likely to be from Eden Prairie. Arts and theater support come more from the inner and older suburbs.

Q: What would the images be like if they were collected by the inhabitants?

A: They probably would have shown more about the sports center. In Roseville, they would have shown Barnes and Noble.

Q: Is there a big different in the school systems between neighborhoods?

A: Absolutely. There's now an effort to move towards community schools. Most kids are now bussed.

Lisa Peattie, real-time rapporteur

You started with a quote about regional images but I can't see how that would help those images in Minneapolis. It's important for planners because its about finances.

In Mike Davis' talk last week, he talked about Latin and Asian migration to the city. They will soon be a major block of voters. They have different needs. Asians are entrepreneurial -- it's a new need of cities -- which competes and corporates. That's regional. Designers design the physical. Eden Prairie will not be very flexible for future changing needs. An example is in Newton. They thought the large houses could be made into smaller units, but homeowners rejected it. It makes suburbs very inflexible and suburban owners don't want it. The result is sprawl.