

BARBARA SWIFT + JOHN FLEMING
PAUL SCHELL, PART II

Barbara Swift, John Fleming and former Seattle Mayor Paul Schell discuss civic buildings, transportation and what makes life more than survival. This is the second of a two-part interview (see ARCADE 24.1/September '05 for Part I).

CIVIC MOVES

PS: You need to declare victory in smaller elements. The little moves, collectively, make greater progress in the long run than the grand gesture.

JF: Bradner Gardens helped build a community and was good architecture. The architects connected with the neighborhood. They recognized that a simple garden can aspire to something higher. Is this the kind of small move you are talking about?

PS: Bradner Gardens was a big victory. The students, neighbors and architects changed the neighborhood forever. It required involvement on the part of the community. A city where everyone feels a sense of ownership and responsibility is the goal. It is not a piece of legislation or a new transportation system. The grand gesture is almost always out of date by the time it comes. The Alaska Viaduct is a grand gesture.

BS: One of the legacies of the neighborhood planning effort is that the individual communities had to negotiate what they wanted to do. As a result, neighbors can talk to each other in a way they could not before.

PS: There's a lot to be learned there and Seattle was the leading edge. It's something to be proud of. It goes back to what we talked about earlier. You've got to find a way to talk to people that doesn't make them feel stupid, so they see architecture and design professionals as people they can rely on and trust.

There are a few big issues in the community: housing affordability and managing growth, adding density and preserving a healthy community. Change isn't welcome, it's inevitable. The question is, "How do we manage change and preserve the qualities of community that make this a special place?"

The big issues on the grand scale are transportation and education. Our education system is a 19th-century system operating in a 21st-century world. It requires incremental change to improve it and some thoughtful discussion about how we teach our kids so they succeed. We're failing big-time.

TRANSPORTATION

PS: We've spent ten years in this town arguing about the technology, forgetting that what we're really trying to do is create a system that gives people options to the car. Rather than fight about the form of the wheels, we ought to figure out how all these lines work as a system. What we've got is stupid. Downtown we have buses, ferries, a light rail, a trolley, a monorail and an air system. That's seven or eight systems each with their own government and tax base. Without significant pressure to partner, each wastes a lot of money. We are being killed by transportation solutions.

Everybody got intimidated because the monorail was proposed by a grassroots alliance. The papers opposed it, the politicians were terrified of it, myself included. I took several hits for saying, "This is dumb." In the end you duck, which is what the current administration is doing.

I am not against the Monorail. I am against the fact that we were building yet another system that didn't connect to our other transportation systems. It had its own government and would end up disappointing the citizens who wanted to buy something that would give them more choices.

JF: If there could be one system who would govern it?

REGIONAL GOVERNMENT

PS: Maybe it is time for a deeper discussion. I've thought our counties are obsolete – three counties serving one region. It's inefficient, ineffective and they're going broke.

I think the main goals of a regional government could be growth management or smart growth, regional transportation, regional courts and jails. Don't get into local zoning and local elements. Be the umpire. Indianapolis has a regional government. Portland is similar.

This is a case where it's got to be a collaborative effort. If it doesn't come from the architecture and planning professions, where's it going to come from? It could come from the School of Public Affairs, but anything that comes out of the universities, politicians suspect. It's got

to come from the grassroots. It has to be an alliance. On this, the natural allies are business, the Chamber of Commerce and transportation advocates.

It's much easier to organize a fight than to make stuff happen. It's a long distance game. You take small wins and you keep plowing ahead. Stopping something is a different strategy. Nothing's wrong with forming a group for the purpose of forming a regional constituency. The arts form a potentially powerful constituency. That's another place where there could be a regional support base.

BS: I see alliances between Allied Arts, FutureWise, People for Puget Sound, the ULI and others. These groups are new or have been rejuvenated.

JF: You mentioned the Sierra Club as a group with strong influence [see ARCADE 24.1]. Most of its members live in the urban fabric.

PS: I think the most influential environmental group is the League of Conservation Voters. They see themselves as the political arm of the environmental community. They have relationships with Labor and are politically savvy. On this governance issue, you might find some unnatural allies in people like Tim Eyman and those against government waste.

CIVIC BUILDING

PS: We haven't talked about civic buildings. I'm very proud of what we got done. Each has a different function and strategy. The Opera House was a rebuild, and the money went inside because that's where the performance happens. The outside is an entrance sequence that was done well by Katherine Gustafson. For the Library we wanted something that could compete with the stadiums. This is a literate, thoughtful town and we wanted something

that would make people's jaws drop. We wanted intellectual building for this intellectual city. I think Koolhaas did a good job. You see the building in ads all the time, and the library is a tourist destination.

City Hall had a different agenda. It had to be comfortable but also out-there and intellectually challenging. We wanted something green and high-tech and old-shoe and civic all at the same time. When you think about the building in that context, it is a community builder. City Hall is a source of civic pride. Civic architecture should set the standard and inspire the private sector to something higher.

REGIONAL COMPARISONS

JF: Are there lessons we may learn from Vancouver or Portland?

PS: They've done a much better job of in-fill housing. Portland has a public development agency that's been a part of that. Business districts should include a significant amount of housing, helping to solve our transportation problem. Why shouldn't the place you work be as nice as the place you live? It is an affordable housing strategy and a transportation strategy.

Explain to people in simple ways: Hey, it's another car that's not on the road; the guy can walk to work! It's cheap; you don't need to pay anything for the land or the infrastructure! This encourages affordable housing. People get it.

Things like Whole Foods and Starbucks are community builders. Integrate them. This whole idea of a separation of uses in our zoning code is a 19th-century idea. It extends from the time when the places people worked weren't fit to live in.

JF: It goes back to what you were saying in the beginning. Bring a school, a supermarket to these areas, the housing will follow. People will want to live there.

PS: And early education and open space, so people can breathe. These are the things you need to be out there pushing. People need to get over whining about the politicians. They're not going to be leaders. And if they are, they're not going to be around long. That's just the way it is.

ACTION

PS: Stop complaining about the press...I have a hard time doing that...I'm so disappointed in the press. They're a dying business just trying to survive. Use blogs, email lists, and community forums... Build alliances. Rather than speaking to impress your peers, learn how to speak to your clients.

Life is more than just surviving it. You've got to figure out a way to have a rich experience. The goal isn't money. You're going to find more joy in life when you find ways to make the place better than it was when you found it. I think it's there in the young people. ■

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