CHAPTER ONE

A Philosophical Basis for Downtown Design

Patterned by streets, shaped by buildings, and forming the connections among everything, a complex spatial fabric forms the place of our public existence in a downtown. Pedestrian walks, squares, plazas, and other intentional public spaces, street space for automobiles and buses, parking areas, transit stops, and the interstitial spaces between them all compose the downtown landscape. The design and use of this landscape have much to do with the quality of life in traditional and traditionally modeled commercial districts. Good design will facilitate movement and access with multiple modes, provide the setting for architecture, create dynamic social spaces, and contribute to the sense of center: a place where social, commercial, and institutional interaction is more dense and more vibrant than in surrounding districts.

This book draws its examples mainly from smaller cities and larger towns, but the principles apply across a wide spectrum of urban commercial districts. The central business districts of the largest cities present a distinctive set of issues related to transit, circulation, and parking that result from their singular scale and are not specifically addressed here. Even in the largest cities, however, multiple urban neighborhoods have centers of concentration where commercial and social activities are clustered in the manner of town centers.

Particularly thoughtful design is needed in downtowns because, as a human environment, they present great potential and great challenges. The viability of commercial districts is essential if communities are to offer a range of choices for living patterns. Design within them is restricted by existing spatial patterns in a way unlike

few other environments. Most important is that downtowns collectively represent a vast underutilized infrastructure made up of thousands of commercial districts in towns, cities, and neighborhoods across North America. Finally, even New Urbanist commercial districts, which are modeled on traditional town centers, would benefit from careful design of downtown landscapes so that the space of these places is as varied and interesting as their buildings.

The existing development patterns of these commercial districts could facilitate a form of town life that consumes less energy and encourages better health through pedestrian and bicycle transportation. Their redevelopment and densification can help conserve farmland and wildlands. They represent a history of investment of energy and materials in buildings and infrastructure that should not be wasted. Finally, vital town centers whose historic fabric is useful in the present might enable stronger feelings of community and shared enterprise to develop.

Perhaps because they are ubiquitous, little has been written about these districts in urban design literature. Geographers, particularly John Jakle and Richard Francaviglia, have written about their evolution and meaning as places.[1] Preservationists, especially the National Trust's Main Street program, have addressed the preservation of their buildings and the financial and organizational tools that can maintain their vitality. From time to time, articles or books have dealt sensitively with design of their landscape, but generally these pieces have been issue focused or specialized in treatment.[2] New Urbanist designers credit them as models for neotraditional communities but haven't focused enough on these places that already exist and need thoughtful planning and investment.

This book will delve into the public fabric that surrounds all the buildings and combines with those buildings to create town centers. It will discuss not only what is commonly known as streetscape design but also more: the downtown landscape's ability to provide space for the uses put to it by a town's citizenry. Streetscape design can be trivialized as a decorative effort, but it is the design of the system that connects people and places and in fact creates many of the places that make a town memorable.

This chapter describes a set of design philosophies whose application can meaningfully guide downtown design. Chapter 2 outlines spatial design issues that have been created by evolving land use patterns. The middle chapters deal with closely linked issues: the connections between neighborhoods and commercial districts (chapter 3), the analysis and design of walking routes inside commercial districts (chapter 4), and the spatial organization of parking (chapter 5). Chapter 6 concludes with design guidelines for the streetscape elements that are used to physically implement downtown plans.

In the years that I have worked with small towns—with students on university service projects, in research funded by state agencies, or with landscape architecture

firms working on planning and design projects in historic commercial districts—I have been guided by some basic philosophies of landscape architecture and historic preservation. It has occurred to me over the years that these ideas are not shared by all of the different professions involved in downtown design. Certainly, the clients who live and work in small towns have a mixed level of understanding of the concepts that would enable them to communicate effectively with designers. Even many landscape architects would intuitively understand some philosophical ideas that guide their work, without being able to clearly explain them to a lay audience.

A good point to begin a book about design in commercial districts, then, is with an explanation of some of the ideas that guide useful design and that explain the very human responses and opportunities to which design is a servant. Is that not the essence of good design: that it creates opportunities for individual choice and community interaction and that it elicits responses of delight, comfort, happiness, or usefulness? That it makes new activities possible and existing activities better, more enjoyable, and more stimulating? That it allows one to lose explicit awareness of one's environment because that environment is so well suited to its purpose?

What ideas are most useful to guide design in the complex fabric of a historic downtown? It helps to look at what people do, or what they would like to do, there.

- In many towns and small cities, the downtown is the one place where people walk, not only for exercise but as a form of transportation. A downtown should be a comfortable walking place.
- Most downtowns have lost their primacy as mass-market retail districts, so they need to be engaging places for the more specialized commercial activities that can thrive in them.
- Centralized historic commercial districts are often the only commercial areas with neighborhoods in walking distance, so they need to be well connected to surrounding areas.
- These districts will not have parking directly in front of every store, as shopping centers do, so they need intuitively predictable parking systems.
- Downtowns will have the most interesting and venerated buildings, landscapes, and symbolic elements in their town. The districts need to provide a setting that lives up to their standard of quality but does not overshadow these elements.
- Downtowns usually best represent early periods of a town's development. They should be conserved so that they can continue to be part of the interesting mix of development periods found in a town.
- Finally, historic commercial districts should be places for authentic experience of what it means to be a town dweller, and they should

> continue to be important places for public events, social interaction, and government facilities.

These purposes and needs that we ascribe to a downtown should be guided by principles in four basic areas. First, environments should balance between being interesting and being comprehensible. Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, in their careers as professors of psychology at the University of Michigan, have worked to understand and explain what makes environments interesting and understandable. Their book *Cognition and Environment: Functioning in an Uncertain World*, in particular, provides an excellent discussion of the balance between a level of complexity that will keep people involved in a place and a level of predictability that will help people stay oriented and comfortably master a location. Second, one should be able to feel safe and in visual control of one's environment. Jay Appleton's book *The Experience of Landscape* explains what makes people comfortable in outdoor spaces, what feels intuitively safe.[3] Third, an essential element of urban places—small town or large city—is a compact mix of land uses. Mixed land uses and short, walkable connections between parts of a town are essential for traditional town life. Fourth, rich environments result from the authentic expression of various ages of buildings and landscapes. Preservation and geography have been in a dialogue, at times an argument, over issues of the authenticity of artifacts themselves and of the life that can exist in and around those artifacts.

All of these—the need to provide comfort, the need to be interesting but understood, the need to be useful and connected, and the need to be authentic—are essential to a complete historic commercial district.

MAKING SENSE AND INVOLVEMENT

Rachel and Stephen Kaplan begin their book *Cognition and Environment* with a story.

> Imagine yourself perched comfortably on the limb of a tree, peering through dense foliage at the behavior of people crossing a stream below. There is no bridge, but there are a few rocks that, with a bit of imagination, could be thought of as stepping stones. Here comes someone now. He steps out onto the stone closest to the bank, balances precariously, looks around, tentatively places one foot on the next stone, withdraws it, tries it again, and finally commits his full weight. Then more looking around, more hesitation, more testing, withdrawing, and testing again. Finally the stream is crossed, and our hero sits down on the bank for a little rest.