

**'CULTURE IS**  
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PETER CALTHORPE, FOUNDING PARTNER OF CALTHORPE ASSOCIATES IN BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

# EXPLORING CULTURAL URBANISM

IT'S A RATIONAL APPROACH TO CREATING AUTHENTIC PLACES. BY TODD MEYER

TODAY, MANY OF OUR COLLEAGUES IN PLANNING AND DESIGN ARE WORKING HARD TO ESTABLISH GREAT PLACES THAT REDUCE OUR ECOLOGICAL FOOTPRINT AND PROMOTE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT. HOWEVER, THERE IS A THIRD COMPONENT WE ALSO SHOULD ADDRESS—**THE ASPECT OF URBANISM THAT REFLECTS LOCAL CULTURE AND ENCOURAGES SOCIAL INTERFACE.** PLACES THAT ARE CULTURALLY AND REGIONALLY AUTHENTIC ALMOST ALWAYS APPEAL TO THE LOCAL POPULACE AND VISITORS ALIKE. THEY ALSO HELP TO SUSTAIN COMMUNITIES OVER THE LONG HAUL.

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Culture is the software of cities just as the built environment is its hardware,” says Peter Calthorpe, founding partner of Calthorpe Associates in Berkeley, California. “They co-evolve with each generation, culture informing and transforming the hardware of a city while technological change and infrastructure redirect the city culture. While each place is unique, there are universal human traits that set the fundamental DNA of great cities: human scale, diversity of action, and social interaction.”

## Whatever it takes

Understanding these criteria can help us grasp our own community values and distinctions, and contribute to our success as planners and designers. Promoting the concept of “cultural urbanism”—that is, celebrating our regional differences and building environments that foster community interaction—enables us to see what makes our cities unique and interesting as well as create genuine and authentic places. Doing this also allows us to preserve those distinctions, celebrate our history, and avoid the homogenization of our urban landscapes, as well as attract employers, institutions, and today’s more educated and mobile workforce.

As U.S.-based practitioners, many of us



The City Creek Center in the heart of Salt Lake City is one of the nation’s largest mixed use downtown redevelopment projects. It features pedestrian-friendly spaces, retail and office space, apartments and condominiums, and a 1,200-foot-long facsimile of the stream that formerly ran through the site.

have traveled to work with clients who have chosen to hire out-of-town consultants to help them conceptualize new communities, neighborhoods, districts, corridors, parks, waterfronts, campuses, resorts, and many other environments. Whether the work is across the country or on the other side of the planet, we are often asked to help determine the best uses for the land in question and to create meaningful and memorable destinations through distinctive, and thoughtful design.

Gordon Gill, founding partner of Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture, describes how local culture informs design: “I think understanding local culture is critical to a project’s success. It’s not just its acceptance but the ability to establish its place within the context

of cultural history. Typically, when we design around the world, we make a great effort to genuinely understand the place, the people, their customs, and the vision for their future.

“Our buildings try to bridge and close the gap between what is and what could be, hopefully without being indifferent to its users and with a degree of sensitivity to its culture. Integrated with this are environmental issues, which often are deeply rooted in the indigenous architecture. Transforming this information through current technologies as well as a formal design language based on performance, which we hope results in an architecture that is, by definition, culturally and environmentally relevant for the future.”





### Understanding the local context

Clients often hire consultants because they want their projects to reflect the best and most innovative ideas. Most consultants find that their peers applaud simple, aus-

tere, and understated design concepts that are well-executed—but how much of that work really responds to the cultural context? Are we in touch with the subtleties of the local community? Do we truly under-

stand the needs and desires of the ultimate users of the space? Is our planning and design work focused on how the site will be maintained over time?

Urban design is also a business concern. Twenty years ago, British strategist John Elkington urged corporations to consider their financial profits in addition to their environmental responsibility and civic duty—to measure what he called the “triple bottom line.” Today, the business case for culturally resonant design is evident in a number of successful projects around the country. One recently completed example is City Creek Center in Salt Lake City, which turned several blighted blocks in the downtown core into a dynamic mixed use environment and pedestrian-oriented central open space. The project owners are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Taubman Centers, Inc.

City Creek Center consists of 23 acres of mixed used construction, including 700,000 square feet of retail, 1.7 million square feet of commercial office space, and more than 500 apartments and condominiums. The commercial space was designed by Callison in partnership with Hobbs + Black Associates, the residential buildings by ZGF Architects, and the landscape architecture by the San Francisco office of SWA Group. The site is served by light rail and is

quite accessible with or without a car. Early on, the Mormon Church was associated with a creek that formerly ran through the site, so the client group sought to revive the waterway as a significant the-



matic element of the development. However, because the project required significant underground parking structures, it was impossible to daylight the actual creek, but the team achieved a realistic 1,200-foot-long facsimile of the stream that contains rainbow and cutthroat trout as well as other native fish species and indigenous plants.

Sustainable aspects include these: 50 percent of the demolition debris was recycled; primarily native, drought-tolerant plants and drip irrigation were used; more than 600 trees were planted; all the monolithic stone was locally sourced; and some of the towers have green roofs. In this case, the triple bottom line was achieved in that it is a financially successful development that increased the local tax base and sought to minimize environmental impact, promote local cultural values, and maximize social interaction.

### More than a brand

Sometimes local residents have a vivid sense of their community's unique attributes. In many ways that's what helps make communities like Berkeley (free thinking), Boulder (outdoor, active), Austin (keeping it weird), and New Orleans (history, entertainment, food) unique. Each place has promoted its identity with traits that reflect and help to perpetuate its traditional cultural values.

Typically, even more subtle elements of a place can help to make it special. Think of the bike messengers that hang out at Sutter and Market in San Francisco and how that changes the space. Look at the people on the sidewalk that activate North Michigan Avenue in Chicago. The experience of riding a bike down South Broad Street in Philadelphia. Or, for that matter, stroll the waterfront parks of Istanbul, dine al fresco in Paris, or play mahjong in a Shanghai park. The unique characteristics of the physical environment have a direct effect on the user experience.

Kartik Shah, urban designer and former associate vice president of Cannon Design, reinforces this point about the unique aspects of each locale: "Global knowledge sharing and capital arrangements today make it imperative for the cross-cultural exchange of ideas, methods, policies, and expertise. Before starting such an exchange, it is extremely important to ask questions about existing cultural values."

He noted that for a city expansion project in Mongolia the planners and administrators first needed to understand the local nomadic population, which lived in yurts or circular single-room houses on 700 square meters of land. "This prompted us to configure our framework plan for a pattern of more organic development," Shah says.

### Enhancing what's local

Copying the attributes of a place—even very desirable ones—and applying them elsewhere usually won't resonate for long. If a client in China says they want to recreate suburban California in suburban Beijing, it is our duty to challenge that notion and propose a plan that celebrates local traditions instead of replicating elements from somewhere else. So how do we plan and design places that promote cultural identity as well as foster better social interaction? The first step is to identify regional differences and then emphasize the characteristics of the local people and environment.

One accepted approach is based on the research described by William Whyte in his 1980 book, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. The nonprofit organization Project for Public Spaces was founded on the principles of Whyte's philosophy and has helped to popularize this placemaking approach across many U.S. cities.

Whyte studied a series of urban spaces in New York City and commented on why some were successful and others were not. The research that PPS does today includes recommendations and action items for components of successful public spaces that ultimately seek to improve communities by fostering a greater amount of social interaction. Among Whyte's ideas:

- The social life in public spaces contributes fundamentally to the quality of life of individuals and society. Designers have a moral responsibility to create physical places that facilitate civic engagement and community interaction.
- Public spaces should be designed from the bottom up, not top down. Design should start with a thorough understanding of the way people use spaces and the way they would like to use spaces.
- We should "look hard, with a clean, clear mind, and then look again—and believe what you see."

Another approach follows the work of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, based in York, England. The foundation's research involves public observation, personal interviews with local stakeholders, and interviews on the street with individuals using various outdoor spaces. These are some of their study's conclusions:

- Sterile and overregulated environments aren't the most conducive to urban vibrancy and integration.
- Providing entertainment and attractions, such as food and beverage, street musicians, and market stalls, brings spaces to life.
- Everyday management and maintenance such as attention to seating, lighting, and accessibility makes a big difference to the usability of space.
- Some degree of human unpredictability is what makes urban places interesting and vital.

### Four cornerstones

SWA's approach to planning and design takes the perspective that successful projects involve four primary cornerstones:

**PEOPLE/CULTURE** The unique features of the local community and its residents throughout history are of great value. Are there unique characteristics about the historic or contemporary local lifestyles that can be celebrated?

**ECOLOGY/ENVIRONMENT** After billions of years of evolution, the functionality of the natural environment should be as much our concern as the goals of the client and end user. We cannot assume that our natural systems can infinitely absorb the impact of development.

**ENDURANCE/PERFORMANCE** With tight budgets, what we create today should be built to last as long as possible. Although sites will look different after they are developed, our improvements should make places perform as well as or better than they did in their predevelopment condition.

**DELIGHT/ART** This is often the key element that is overlooked. In the end, the places we create need to be compelling, memorable, unique, engaging, and fun to visit over and over again. Artful expressions that reflect local culture can play a large role in accomplishing this.

"In recent years our industry has focused on environmental sensitivity, efficiency, and technology to the degree that

this approach is now considered by many as baseline thinking. At SWA, we view planning through the lens of design,” says Kinder Baumgardner, president of SWA Group. “As a result, our process acknowledges the rationality of conservation while also seeking to express the essence of delight for the end user.”

After setting up a proper approach, the second key step in developing culturally resonant urban spaces is learning as much as we can about the region, community, and local history in traditional and non-traditional ways. Deep research helps. This is what Apple Inc. has done to learn what people want and need—and then to use the information as the basis of product design.

“A clear and compelling power of place, our ultimate measure of success, will be nourished by many ingredients,” notes Karen Alschuler, FAICP, global urban design leader at Perkins + Will. “The recipe may vary from robust analysis to visceral reactions and be informed by the stories, the poetry, music, or food, the climate and resources, and the multifaceted aspirations of people engaged.

“In the best projects, an open mind, clear process, and time spent in the setting will take the team to a moment of realization. This is when patterns, program, and systems merge to inform a dynamic vision both resonant in its roots and ready for the contributions of a new generation.”

### Immersion

Along with research, we should also spend as much time as we can in the community to get to know it personally. Careful observation is one way to learn, but it's also important to speak to the people who live there and know the place intimately—to see their daily routines and hear about their aspirations. What do they enjoy about their neighborhood? How do they like to use the existing public spaces? What's missing or could be improved?

Finally, we should always work collaboratively with other professionals and local partners. Often as the out-of-town or lead consultants, we are expected to bring fresh and innovative ideas to the table, which many of us do. However, in reality we are only half of the equation since we will never know as much about the local environment as local people do.

While we bring useful outside experi-

ence and a strong point of view about potential design solutions, these need to be tempered by what will be successful in the local context. In short, as consultants we need to really listen to our clients and community members.

Sometimes it's useful to recruit professionals who can bring certain historical and cultural aspects of a place to light. Uta Birkmayer, a friend from Germany, has an interesting consulting practice in San Luis Obispo, California, called Xsense Authentic Places. Her goal is to connect designers and owners to the authentic roots of a place. She wades into the essence of a location and provides key information for more informed design concepts that ultimately translate to more provocative and transformative experiences in the built environment.

“Planners often don't have the privilege of spending more than a day on site to grasp the essence of a place,” Birkmayer says. “At Xsense we aim to bridge that gap by taking the time to connect to local stakeholders and culture with a variety of research and feedback tools. We stay among the locals, live and breathe their daily life, listen, watch, write, film, photograph, and ask many questions.”

She adds: “It gets personal. People take us to their grandmothers' houses in the middle of the jungle; we're invited to sit with a shipwrecked historian living up in the mountains and taste the food only a local can cook; we also spend time with land owners and developers to understand their deeper motivations, dreams, ideas, and issues, and they often remark that ‘no one ever spends this much time with us to really listen.’”

### Community resources

Nonprofessional planners and designers are another part of the equation. They can in-

clude people who live, work, or relax on or near the project area, or whose family lived on the land previously. It could be the facilities director at a corporation or university who understands how people use the campus. It might also be a librarian or teacher in a local school. These informal partners can help us understand more than just zoning, building codes, materials, or methods of construction. They can educate us as to the culture, traditions, and peculiarities of individual locales. We should be humble enough to listen to what they have to say and consider these elements in our work.

So, the next time you are discussing the plan for a new project, participating in a community discussion, or sitting down at the drawing board, try to really consider what is important for the people who will ultimately use the place. We all have to think about money. Some of us consider the environmental impact of our daily choice of transportation, housing, energy, food, and water. But we should all take more time to think about how we are creating spaces that celebrate local heritage, draw people together, and encourage them to interact with others.

We might be surprised to find that small, compact spaces—like the miles of sidewalk between the street and the buildings in every city—are sometimes the most interesting and engaging places. A conversation with a longtime bike messenger, the daily commuter who's walked on that sidewalk for 10 years, or the corner grocer may be the best source for understanding and designing great spaces that resonate now and for years to come. ■

Todd Meyer is planning practice leader in the Houston office of SWA Group, a landscape architecture, planning, and urban design firm founded in 1957 and active throughout the world, with offices in Dallas, Houston, San Francisco, Sausalito, Laguna Beach, and Shanghai. Meyer has worked with a wide range of public- and private-sector clients to plan and design authentic urban places.

### RESOURCES

CLASSICS John Elkington: *The Triple Bottom Line* (1994), [www.sustainability.com](http://www.sustainability.com).

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