HCMA Architecture +Design

PLACES Manifesto | Life Within Buildings
Darryl Condon, Managing Principal

"Social activities occur spontaneously, as a direct consequence of people moving about and being in the same spaces. This implies that social activities are indirectly supported whenever necessary and optional activities are given better conditions in public spaces."

-Jan Gehl, from Life Between Buildings (published 1971)

In his influential book, *Life Between Buildings*, Jan Gehl demonstrated a compelling need for architects and urban planners to design spaces that support and encourage the wide range of social interactions that are critical to a healthy community. It was written at a time when the disastrous results of post-war modernist city planning were being felt and the need to challenge the pervasive thinking of the day was becoming clear. Together with colleagues William H Whyte and Jane Jacobs, his work has been central to re-thinking how cities are designed. Their work argued that the spaces between buildings were far more important in defining spaces than what what happened within the buildings themselves.

Our philosophy is not necessarily at odds with this opinion, but rather looks to extend this thinking. We view the next step in the evolution of city making as extending these principles, now widely accepted by urban planners, to the spaces within buildings. This is framed by a belief that the informal activities that Gehl strives to encourage in the public realm are also vitally important when they occur within buildings.

HCMA has several decades of an iterative exploration of public building types, with each successive design informed by the public experience of those that preceded them. Through this progression we have recognized convergence within the wide range of public building types and the shared potential that each possesses. Along the way, the notion that public facilities can, and should, help transform communities has shaped our work.

The following is a summary of our principles—as designers serving the community—for shaping public architecture.

1. All public buildings have a role to play

Regardless of the programmatic functions they house, all public buildings have potential to serve a broader public mandate. While the capacity varies between building types it is our responsibility as architects to consider the full range of what's possible and to provide responses that maximize the social potential.

2. Every site and situation is unique

All projects must be carefully situated in response to both their social and their urban/environmental contexts. As designers we must look—to see the potential of a street, outlook or natural setting—but we must also listen—to hear the real, and not just apparent, needs of users and clients. Visual insight married to social appropriateness resonates beyond site boundaries, informing design as a catalyst for positive community change.

3. Involve the community in decision making

The social potential of a public building is enhanced by the level of community involvement that is utilized in the processes associated with their design, construction and operation. A strong commitment to meaningful community engagement at all stages of a project's life cycle is critical to success.

4. Design for life

As architects we have a unique ability, and responsibility, to positively influence all stages of life. In an individual person's life the stages are seamless. The same is true for a community. Truly public buildings accommodate all regardless of ability, race or beliefs. We create architecture that reduces barriers to use—whether physical, cultural or social.

5. Seize opportunities for social space

Informal social space is often overlooked in community facilities. We believe the provision of a variety of these spaces ensures that a building integrates with the lives of its users, and that linkages fostered there can benefit all. In planning public facilities, we actively seek opportunities to provide such spaces, large and small, both within and between mandated program elements.

6. Innovate

Our work is animated by a spirit of innovation. We look for new solutions to the challenges that other designers accept as pre-determined--givens. Pushing boundaries sometimes involves greater risks which need to be managed with careful study, evaluation, testing and insight.

7. Learn and evolve

We strive to learn from past projects, both our own and those of others. We learn from what has worked well and from what could be better. We travel and study culturally unique approaches to public architecture from around the world, then seek opportunities to integrate them into our work. Learning is a crucial component of design and building.

8. Maintain focus on the community

Underlying our work is a belief in a dedicated responsibility to the communities we serve. This means providing facilities that go beyond merely meeting programmatic needs to, instead, define true community places, attractive to all.

Our work is not done in isolation but rather in collaboration with our clients, our staff, our consultants and the communities where we work. Together we create places that play a significant role in shaping our communities. For this we are very grateful.