

The Importance of Urban Design and Partnerships for Urban Design

The Downtown Fort Worth Strategic Action Plan of 1993 commences with: "Our vision is to capture and enrich Fort Worth's heritage as the frontier city of the future. Reflecting the city's warmth, character, multi-cultural diversity and artistic grace, Fort Worth's downtown will be a major world gateway, a vibrant center and catalyst for international business, finance, transportation, commerce, communications and everyday life."

Clearly, this is a comprehensive and far-reaching Vision. If this Vision is analyzed, it can be seen that the growth and evolution of the CBD in conformance with this vision can only occur with a multi-disciplinary approach that also integrates the best information from all governmental agencies. Most simply, the City is far too complex, and the interactions among its components too integrated to allow any one element to dominate.

This integration of purposes is noted in the Downtown Plan section on "Urban Design and Open Space-Objectives, "where transportation projects are directed to "[I]nclude quality urban design as an integral part of all highway, street, and transit improvements in the Downtown area [including] landscaping, public art, design of structures, [and] sensitivity to [the] unique Downtown setting or heritage."

Urban design in Fort Worth should be considered to include all of the built and shaped realm of the City, from buildings to trees, streets and the entire universe of other elements that make up the City.

Importantly, the City must continue to function and perform as best as practical. Because physical space in the City is not unlimited, there will usually be competing needs for the use of space. One example is street space, where sidewalks, plantings, parked and moving vehicles, utilities and more all must be placed within the same corridor. In order to ensure the continuing good, and hopefully improving, function of the City, decisions involving urban design and change must also be fully informed as to the existing and future needs, desires, goals and plans that all City and other agencies may have for a particular area or feature.

The "quality urban design," directed by the Downtown Plan and the Vision statement involves qualitative judgments as a part of the process of creating either a new part of the City, or in changing an existing part. Since a city of so many cannot have a single voice making these qualitative (and therefore somewhat discretionary) decisions, it is therefore critical that the City establish its own processes that will ensure fully informed decisions in order to effect quality urban design comporting with the Vision. Urban design guidelines, also recommended in the Downtown Plan, can assist this process.

The direction given in the Downtown Plan, and good urban planning generally, requires that the best solutions will result from decisions made in consideration of the most information that can be brought to bear on the matter at hand. Single purpose solutions, such as the elevated highway placed over the Lancaster corridor years ago, served the function of moving vehicles to and through the City quickly, but served the areas beneath and adjacent with Lancaster far less well at the level of the street.

In Fort Worth, the City also has the great benefit of private partners, such as Downtown Fort Worth, Inc. Historic Fort Worth, and Fort Worth South all of which can assist in the City's efforts to reach well informed decisions and then to seek out private partners, where appropriate, to assist in effecting physical results.

There are a few, guiding principles for good urban design:

- Design to enhance the pedestrian experience at the street- this serves to enhance all other downtown activities and opportunities;
- Buildings and structures large and small should be of urban form, and they should have an urban relationship with the adjacent street; and
- Civic buildings and places should be recognizable as such by virtue of their design and location in the City.

The City of Fort Worth is a large City geographically; it should therefore recognize and define its urban limits. Within those limits, if the evolution of the City is guided along good urban design principles, the City's Vision may be realized and the City may become one of the truly great places in the world.

6/16/99 Rick Chellman