Urban Design Winners: Place or Image?

Is the historic role of a town center as the link of a community still valid? If so, how has this concept been adapted to 20th century needs? A rare opportunity to examine these issues in practice is provided by the Leesburg Municipal Government Center and Reston Town Center, two Virginia projects that received Urban Design Awards this year from the American Institute of Architects.

Leesburg, a marvelously preserved 18th century town with an eclectic mixture of delicately scaled brick, stone and wood structures, features a historic courthouse set on a town green, which still functions as the traditional meeting place. In 1987, the town sponsored a national design competition for a new town hall, municipal center and parking garage to be located on a block adjacent to the courthouse green. The winning scheme by Hanno Weber & Associates of Chicago, now completed, is a deft placement of elements that respects the historic streetscape, provides important connections for pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and develops a sense of place for the local government. By locating the parking garage in the heart of the block and placing the municipal building along one edge of it, the result is a new town green which runs through the block and gives prominence to the town hall.

The new civic complex at Leesburg is neither overtly historicist nor starkly modern, with the architecture alluding to historic elements, but interpreting them in contemporary ways with modern materials. These buildings are contextual in their urban responses, historic in scale. While the overall site plan of the development is excellent, the best aspect of Leesburg's new complex is the town green. Part formal paved space, part garden, the green is made all the more noble and appropriate by the octagonal town hall, which derives a strong presence from its towering roof and soaring cupola that recalls the historic courthouse nearby.

A different approach to urban design was taken some 20 miles away in the new town of Reston, which was begun from scratch in 1963. A town center for Reston was intended since its inception, but active planning for it did not begin until 1981. Amidst great fanfare, the first phase of Reston Town Center was completed in 1990. Developed privately and designed by RTKL Associates of Baltimore with Sasaki Associates of Watertown, Mass., this 20-acre project includes 60 shops, two office towers, a multiplex theater and a 14-story hotel surrounded by a multitude of parking lots and a parking garage.

On the surface, there is much to admire here. The buildings form a well-related ensemble created by a continuous two-story base that gives strong edges to the streets. The horizontal alignment of the buildings and repetition of architectural elements lend coherence to the façades. Shop fronts are pleasantly consistent, and the street amenities (lights, signs, benches and plants) benefit from being designed as a package. The result is at once spacious yet humane, functional yet gracious, coherent yet lively. At the center of it all is Fountain Square, a paved and landscaped plaza that, to its credit, offers a comfortable place to stroll and sit beneath shade trees.

But something is amiss here. In spite of its initial pleasantness, there is an uneasiness about Reston Town Center which springs from its artificiality. Everything is new. It's all perfect, gleaming, somehow unreal. Is this really a town center, a gathering place for the community? Where is the traffic, the hustle and bustle, the activity of people? It looks more like some new form of shopping mall with an urban theme. Few residents can walk, ride a bicycle or take a bus to get here; the automobile is virtually mandatory. What's missing? There are no public uses or purposes, no civic presence, no poor people. Certainly the addition of planned housing will make this town center seem more genuine. New services for residents will add a variety of activity, and a cultural center will provide another boost.

It is difficult, on one hand, to compare the projects at Leesburg and Reston because of their differences in age, scale and purpose. And yet, because they are both called town centers, they stand being scrutinized as such. If Leesburg fits our traditional definition of town center, then Reston does not and its name should be changed. But whatever it is called, Reston Town Center will be interesting to observe as it grows, for it is as much an experiment in urban design as was the original plan for the new town.

In contrast, one can already detect the significance of the renewed town center at Leesburg. This is more than an anachronism; this is a testament to the validity of the human need for a strong political, social and economic center with the continuity of tradition. Citizens need a strong sense of place to develop community spirit and loyalty. The lesson here is to value and support such genuine places not only for their historic example, but also for their contemporary validity.

Michael Bednar, FAIA

In Reston, something is amiss: the feeling of the new town center is artificial.
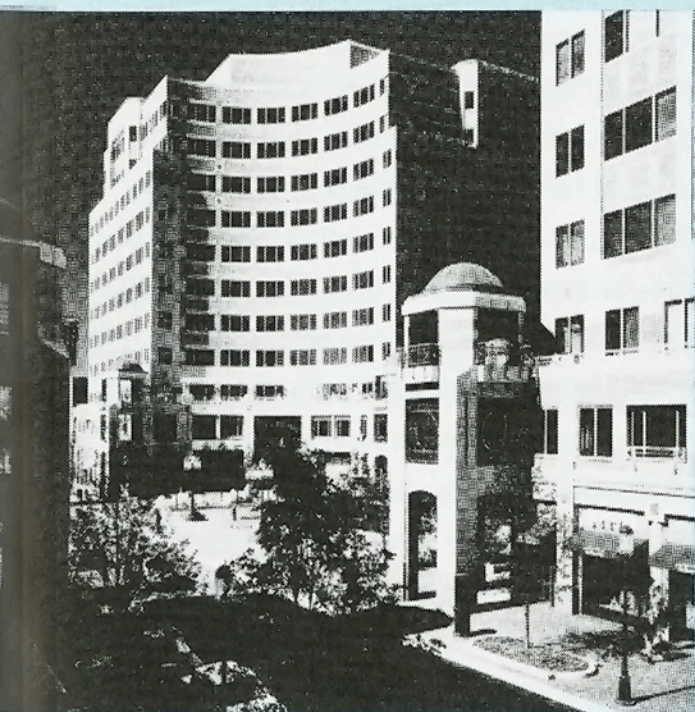
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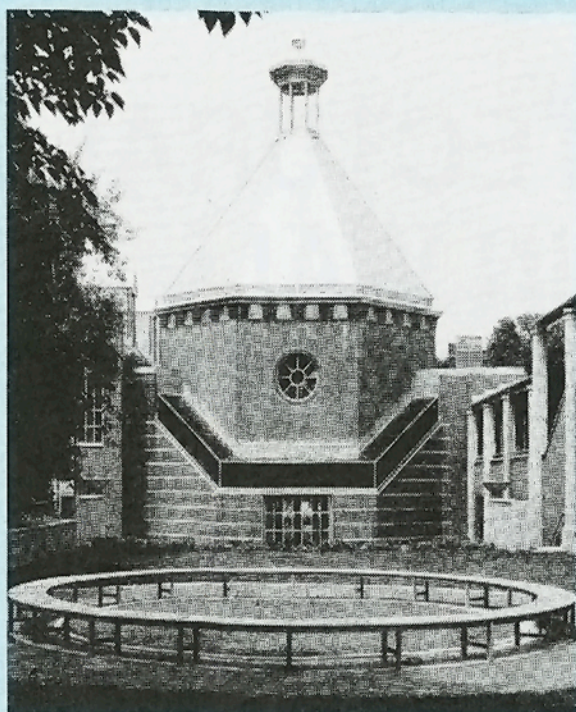
The garden space of Leesburg's government center responds to the scale of the town.

Michael Bednar

The author is a professor of architecture at the University of Virginia.