digital dilemma

Is Public Space Dead?
TKTS2K in Times Square
Megadesign vs. Other Urbanisms
Dinkeloo Fellowship
Green Plazas
Pier 40 Park
Real Estate = Architecture?
Zoning By Design

Where is the 'Public' in e-topia?
Van Alen Report focuses on fundamental challenges for reurbanizing the design of the public realm, combining thought and practice, and promoting curiosity and delight. We choose topics at random. The Van Alen Institute supports and repositions design thinking for public concerns. These challenges are at the core of the Institute’s Projects in Public Architecture, reimagining design competition, workshops, websites, publications, exhibitions and forums.

Van Alen Report is a forum. As with our website, (www.vanalen.org), our goal is to create a public realm, and appropriately, the commissioned and published Van Alen Report was first made possible through the support of a public agency, The New York State Council on the Arts, a State Agency.

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**FEATURE**

Boy Brow

**Is Public Space Dead?**

**NEWSBRIEF**

TKTS2K in Times Square

Megadesign vs. Other Urbanisms

Dinkeloo Fellowship

Green Plazas

Pier 40 Park

**SOUNDBYTES**

Real Estate = Architecture?

**PLATFORM**

Phyllis Lambert

Philip Nobel

Stefanos Polyzoides

Evan Rosen

Barbara Swift

**UPDATE**

Van Alen Report 6

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Cover: detail from on fire. (Photolab)

Last spring the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University sponsored a conference entitled Exploring (New) Urbanism. The highlight was intended to be the session where New Urbanist leader Andres Duany and megaurbanist Rem Koolhaas were pitted against each other. A bit of an anticlimax, those ringside say.

But Koolhaas made a statement that has spurred further debate. A veteran provocateur, Koolhaas declared: “Public space is dead,” implying that the utopian notion of traditional public space is a quaint, nostalgic relic of the 20th-century to be forever retired when the giant 1,000-pound Waterford crystal ball descends into Times Square on January 1, 2000.

Koolhaas pronounced that the ubiquity of technology has created a “universal city that exists wherever we are in the world.” Issues of city and suburb are moot. “The real public space is invisible to the eye.”

By the October 1.4 deadline, over 600 designers had submitted entries for the TKT52R competition. That’s hundreds more than any previous Van Alen Institute Design Competition, and is an extraordinary expression of interest by any international competition measure.

It is too early to report on the competition itself, however we are able to give an update on the larger issue of media’s impact on public space by looking at a few changes in Times Square south of 44th Street.

Times Square has billed itself as the crossroads of the world for most of this century, and in its current incarnation it seems to have reinvented what that means. The huge banners around the district declare New York City as the Millennium Capital of the World, and at 44th and Broadway, one begins to get an inkling of the start of the new millennium.

First of all, it seems that it will involve a lot of young people greasing. On a late September day, you look up at the MTV studio, where boogie days go on behind the plate glass on the second floor.

Access on the bow-wake traffic island sits the new United States Armed Forces Recruiting Station, a formal, elegant building with some neon flash, designed by Architecture Research Office, a reminder that the armed forces may be the last officially “format” organization in the world. But just north of the entrance, there it is again — young people dancing, while a video crew and art directors with clip-boards tell them what to do. Needless to say, tourists are busy videotaping the vapidly youths quaking, while the locals just gape.

And behind you is the new second floor studio of ABC’s Good Morning America designed by HWH International fronted by a huge, multi-floor, blindingly bright sign designed by Kupav Koutsomitis Architects, featuring the district’s second Jumbotron screen. In today’s public space, you can dance, join the Army or the Navy, be on TV — or just watch it — and none of these activities appear to be mutually exclusive.

It looks as though the public space of the future is going to be on a permanent adrenaline rush, and as amped as the bodies of the wrestlers inspiring the World Wrestling Federation theme restaurant scheduled to open in midtown 1350 Broadway. At least we know one thing. The next century is going to be loud, physical, and virtual all at once.

Two studies underway on Manhattan’s WEST SIDE have weakened the age-old debate, which serves cities better, wholesale re-development or incremental growth?

The dividing line for the investigations is West 34th Street. To the south, the International Foundation for the Canadian Centre for Archi-
In a capitalist society, where private property is implicit, public space is always being encroached upon by greedy analog man. How is the digital Goliath further altering this tenuous balance?

Are we under threat of living in discrete pods, physically alienated from each other, yet living generic existences where everybody has access to everything instantly, and is virtually everywhere at a mouse's click? If I long for public space I can "immigrate" to (activeworlds.com), where for $19.95 a month I can enjoy the privileges of "citizenship" and join the other members of my "community." I can build my own building in this virtual community, which apparently has the acreage of California. For that matter, I can even "Buy A World" an icon teases.

There is a deceptive language here that appears to do double duty, a lexicon that works on and offline. The structure of the Internet may lend itself to using terms like chat room, firewall, site, and its creators may even call themselves architects, but maybe the experience is not so analogous. Perhaps the most provocative digital/analog transference is the word "community" with its multifold meaning.

Nineteenth-century utopian movements married new building types and new modes of communal living with their socially-infused ideologies. What is today's revolution going to build and, moreover, what is it going to take down with it?

William Mitchell, dean of the School of Architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and author of the recent book e-topia: "Urban Life, Jim – But Not as We Know It" might say e-topia is the Y2K version of utoopia. Other urbanists tell how they see the digital impact on public space.

PRIVATE → PUBLIC

Digital technology is a catalyst, arguably replacing a tired paradigm in a prophetic manner befitting the millennium, but it is also means to an unprecedented invasion of privacy jeopardizing unalienable rights.

A serious threat to the commons comes from individuals (backed by collaborating governments) who lack the respect for others that is the essential ingredient of public space. These people exploit diverse technologies to express their disdain for others," bemoans historian Gregory Dreicer, currently teaching at the Center for New Design at Parsons School of Design. "Once, a booth contained a private conversation. Today, the voices of cell phone users splash into pieces public environments: restaurants, trains, and sidewalks."

The digital blurs the traditional division between public and private through more invasive means, like ever proliferating surveillance cameras and through personal profiles created by the digital cookie crumbs you leave on the websites you visit. Sometimes this is for private gain and other times it is done in the name of security.

Venerable institutions of democracy like public schools routinely install metal detectors and video surveillance. The design for the Federal Campus in Oklahoma City, the replacement for the destroyed Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, has the directive of representing the U.S. Government with the magnanimous outstretched arms of representational democracy while simultaneously maintaining the security of a fortress. It is disturbing that these public venues are more about public defense than public discourse. This is a man-made tragedy: technology defends man from himself.

But as the public building grows opaque, the home is becoming transparent. Digital technology is permeating the domestic realm, thereby making it more public. The home is no longer a private refuge. The advance of the live/work generation suggests a fortress-like existence, but in reality, spatial boundaries diminish not simply through the Internet, but other gadgets of the digerati like video conferencing and worksite webcams.

Private → Public
Entries for the IFCA competition are online at (ca sp. 154x154). Proposals for Hall’s Kitchen South are on view at Station Space for Art and Architecture from mid-November through the end of December. 

The Institute’s 1999 DINKELKO FELLOWSHIP has been awarded to Nicholas A. de Monchaux, Quinn Schwerner was additionally selected as an alternate, while both Victor Agar and Cheryl A. Spector received citations.

The Dinkello competition called for portfolio submissions demonstrating an environmentally-conscious understanding of contemporary architectural design in concert with technology. The fellowship was founded in honor of John Dinkello (1916-1981) of Kevin Roche John Dinkello & Associates. The award consists of a $10,000 grant to be applied to a two-month stay at the American Academy in Rome and a month of additional travel. The jury included Diana Balmori, Keller Easterling, Michael Morf, Karen Van Leemput and James Wines. The jury commended de Monchaux, M. Arch. Princeton, 1999, for his fellowship submission, Green and Simple: A Proposal for Study of the Intersection of Interdependence Between Ecological and Architectural Minimalism. de Monchaux plans to research the topic during his travels and curate an exhibition in the U.S. upon his return.

James Wines, head of the department of architecture at Pennsylvania State University and author of the forthcoming book The Art of Architecture in the Age of Ecology, issued a challenge in his jury comments: “Must of the entries fall into one of two categories: 1) A narrow interpretation of ‘green’, seen only as some kind of resource-saving technology (missing all of the social, psychological and philosophical implications); 2) The superficial use of ‘green’ as a cosmetic idea applied to business-as-usual design.”

In e-topia do we have to dispense with public space as a place where democracy is cultivated?

The 5-acre plaza at the World Trade Center may be redesigned as the financial district increasingly becomes a 24-hour community. Hoping to draw nighttime visitors, Swank Hayden Connell Architects has designed a FILTERED LAWN, a sloping grass amphitheater to replace the complex’s central fountain.

When designed the WTC’s vast plaza held auspicious intentions, an elegant plaza in the heart of Wall Street. Instead, it ended up an under-utilized wind tunnel lacking a human scale. In the past four years the area has seen a growing residential community and by this year the WTC launched a series of evening music and dance performances staged on a temporary structure.

“We need to become a 24-7 community,” said Cheriss Nanninga, director of real estate for The Port Authority which owns the WTC. In recent years, The Port Authority has sought a mixed-use vitality, introducing shops and restaurants on the first floor and destination shopping in the concourse mall. If The Port Authority goes through with the project, it should cost approximately $7 million.

The tilted lawn would face a pedestrian drawbridge spanning a reflecting pool, which when raised would double as the stage. An attenuated blade-like skygirt would house a new escalator descending to the concourse mall right at its heart, adjacent to The Gap and Banana Republic.

“The shape is a very aggressive act,” says project architect Howard Lester. “It proclaims itself to the plaza. We wanted to create something that incorporated natural living elements, but that was clearly a man-made imposition.”

BALSLEY PARK, currently under construction in midtown, is likewise moving away from the axial grid towards more organic forms with its elliptical sloping lawn the park’s main visual feature. Landscape architects Thomas Balsley Associates designed the esplanade park located on the southeastern corner of 57th Street and Ninth Avenue. Southcross LLC, the owners of The Sheffield and the neighboring 16-acre Sheffield Plaza, renamed the “plaza” after its designer in gratitude for a park design that the community quickly endorsed, expediting the design review process after years of impasse. With its playful shapes and bustling farmers market, Balsley Park tends to be a passive visit pocket park.

Furthermore, rarely is a client so impressed by a designer’s work that the limestone is carved with their surname. Naming a public park after a private practitioner underscores the bizarre impetus behind the problem, saddling public and private. Balsley streets may be a dying breed in New York as planners question the public benefits of allowing developers to push the zoning envelope in exchange for providing this kind of public space.
"Few ideas have as much potential to exploit in the coming years as the transformation of the landscape."

CARRYING THE NEW URBANIST BANNER, James Howard Kunstler, author of The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape, is also concerned with how this duality relates to the landscape. For Kunstler, the predication of public space is that we have turned it into a universal automobile slum.

"In the meantime, public space in America, and the civic life that has to dwell within it, becomes increasingly damaged, crippled, and impoverished. My own belief is that economic and political forces are underway in the world that will soon require us to live differently, whatever our theoretical orientation," Kunstler forewarns. "History is merciless. We are a wicked people and we deserve to be punished."

Mitchell fears that the digital revolution could yield a disparity similar to the urban flight and sprawl wrought by the introduction of the automobile. As the digital revolution sends people home as telecommuters, local neighborhoods will be revitalized and reconfigured, making the rigor of current land use zoning obsolete. All very positive community-building, but Mitchell ultimately fears a stratification of classes: an urban polarity, "dual cities" where the poor and the wealthy are increasingly estranged as the "haves" lose their dependency on the "have-nots."

**SERENDIPITY IN E-TOPIA?**

**Is this alarmist? In e-topia do we have to dispense with the modern canon of public space, as a place where democracy is cultivated, where there are opportunities for chance meetings with diverse people—the stuff of urban life?**

Eric Liltin, principal of New York-based MESH architectures + environments + web spaces, believes that in our contemporary society where all activities garner corporate sponsorship nobody wishes to be responsible for creating and maintaining public spaces. Liltin believes the web can pick up the baton of spontaneous urban encounter.

"The Internet has emerged as a system with potential for a kind of urban experience. Web urbanism: Web urbanism is the migration of traditional urban experience to the Web," says Liltin. Like cities, the Web originally was begun under public auspices, but soon became commercial.

"Web urbanism demands that one react to unfolding events in concert (or conflict) with others, not as a solitary observer. Web urbanism must prove itself necessary. It must make shoppingbrand.com look like a lonely minimalism."

"There is no 'planning' in cyberspace. Public space cannot be imposed on the public. But there is a chance to build systems that recreate the dynamics of traditional public space so engaging that they define new infrastructures for the network," Liltin predicts.

Andrew Shapiro, lawyer, writer and senior advisor at The Markle Foundation, may have a solution that will make Liltin's Web urbanism work. In his book, The Control Revolution: How the Internet is Putting Individuals in Charge and Changing the World We Know (www.controlrevolution.com), Shapiro explains how democracy is threatened by the Internet and proposes PublicNet, a model for preserving public space and free speech. Like Liltin, Shapiro believes that the Internet provides the infrastructure for democratic forums and what is currently missing is diversity and fertility.

"President Clinton has declared that the Net is becoming our town square. If so, then we should design and use the Net so that it has some of the serendipity of a Times Square or Hyde Park," writes Shapiro. Shapiro’s PublicNet would be an online space that would function...
as a street corner in cyberspace providing a forum for all voices. The PublicNet icon would be linked to an endless digital public forum, an aggregation of web sites and chat rooms. The randomness characteristic of real public space would be ensured as different speakers periodically solicited user's attention through banners running across the PublicNet icon.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE

Tony Hiss, author of The Experience of Place and currently a visiting scholar at New York University's Taub Urban Research Center likewise sees the Internet as an ally for public space, making information and resources about urban and open space easily accessible to the public, creating new constituencies and awareness.

"Technology and the Internet are not adversely affecting public space. People have the same needs to be in each other's presence. Instead, they allow for more sharing of information," says Hiss, citing Van Alen's website (www.vanalen.org). "The more we reclaim places that were once privatized -- like the waterfront -- the more they are part of everyone's life."

In a joint project, The New York City Department of City Planning, The Municipal Art Society, and Jerold Kayden, professor of urban planning at Harvard, are also employing technology as a tool for public space in the Privately-Owned Public Space Project. Kayden has undertaken a survey of New York City's 330+ privately-owned public spaces (plazas, arcades, indoor spaces, small parks, etc.). These places were primarily established through the City's 1961 zoning resolution which encouraged the creation of public spaces on private properties in exchange for zoning allowances.

Given the ambiguity about ownership and stewardship, Kayden has seen numerous instances where the public is physically discouraged or forbidden to enter through the erection of gates, spikes on ledges, removal of seating and even doormen telling people the areas are private.

The initial goal of the project is to determine the correct legal status of each of these places. The findings will be published in Privately-Owned Public Space: The New York City Experience in spring 2000, but will, moreover, form a database accessible by the Internet to include the legal status of each site. The ultimate result may be changes in enforcement or in the zoning resolution itself.

NEW MEDIA/PUBLIC SPACE

Architect and interactive media designer Kadambani Baxi believes the critical questions facing public space are related to issues of media -- not only the so-called "new" media -- but all media as they continue to be reshaped by the ever expanding telecommunication networks.

In "Homeoffice," one of a series of explorations in The Entropy Project, which Baxi developed along with partner Reinhold Martin, a new aggregate space is created by overlaying images taken from "utopian" advertising and "dystopian" films of the 1960s onto Skidmore Owings & Merrill's First National City Bank in Houston. The public's perception of space through this media filter in turn creates new space without a finite character.

"What are the limits of 'nonspace,' when the neutrality of its location no longer matters, but what is at issue is how it is accessed, utilized and distributed?" Baxi asks. "How can images -- not only available in abundance, but also as dematerialized bits of data -- be transformed into raw materials for creating realities -- actual, virtual or imagined?"

Media artist Michael Naimark of Interval Research Corporation, who has produced public space installations exploring place representation for over twenty years, is also optimistic that technology will become a foot soldier for public space. "At best, bold new forms of virtual and actual"
community will appear. Imagine actual public spaces wired together by ultra-high bandwidth network connections, where actual neighbors are co-present with virtual ones. Imagine a public space for 100 people tapping 100 times the bandwidth available to the home (whatever the bandwidth). Imagine an Imax-meets-the-Web immersive interactive public space," suggests Naimark.

"This would be a draw for many to leave their homes, just as live theater and cinema are over television, as museums and galleries are over catalogs, and as game arcades are over home video games," says Naimark. "At the moment, no such networked media-rich public spaces exist. This is a niche screaming to be imaginatively filled."

**POST-DIGITALISM**

The way new technology is affecting public space is clearly diffuse. What is it we value that it is threatening? Maybe nothing. Perhaps we are innured, despondent, sick of the urban spontaneity that traditionally defines public space. In New York, the subway—a one-time new technology and perhaps the most significant social equalizer in the five boroughs—is that place where we court serendipity and diversity. With telecommuting, perhaps I will no longer having this daily pleasure only possible through propinquity. Maybe it is more pleasant to stay home with my non-sentient computer, but in a democracy isn’t there a social, political imperative? How can designers of real and virtual public spaces work in complementary ways to maintain community and civic life? Whither utopia? If we transport ourselves to a time when MoMA is hosting a show on Post-Digitalism, what will designers be trying to recapture?

ZAC MBCBOT

Van Alen periodically poses questions to its lenses and posts responses on our website (www.vanalen.org). To join, please send an email to vanalen@vanalen.org. Here is a sampling of recent feedback.

**HOW IS INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CHANGING PUBLIC SPACE?**

> Telecommunication technologies create new forms of space which are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. These new “distributed” spaces alter social behavior, change our relationship to physical space and, ultimately, transform both the character of the city and its role within a society.

As individuals develop communities which are more succinctly defined and distributed over broad geographical areas, public identity, and consequently public space, is extended beyond the traditional boundaries of culture and locality and begins to reflect the network structure of these new, essentially private, communities. It is this privatization of the public realm which characterizes the space of the new city as well as the changes to existing urban centers.

The impact of this shift is most apparent in the changing fabric of the American city where private interests increasingly dominate urban planning and development. While privatization is, perhaps, antithetical to the notion of public space, the challenge remains for the architect to design these new spaces to create places which enable the construction of a society which is responsive to its citizens by facilitating broader understanding between individuals.

This, after all, is the essential role of design in the public realm.

—Ian P. Morley
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> The spatial definition of public has been undermined and colonized by the forces of development and commerce. The 21st-Century definition of public space has been set loose in a "garden setting" within a privately controlled and managed private setting. The critical point of focus in late capitalism is the discursive public realm. This is where information technology has the potential to achieve a dynamic change in the role and function of post-industrial public culture.

There is the potential, but little proof that the electronic realm can support a community dialogue which transcends the needs of time and space. The Media and Echo begin to illustrate these ideas, but there is little to indicate that any city has met the dual challenges of technology access and use/training to enable an equitable public dialogue.

—Tim Collins
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> IT (Information Technology) is quickly turning the life out of existing public spaces. New public spaces are becoming awash in flooding information. Where can the city dweller hide from the nuisance? Does the city dweller even know the need to hide from the nuisance?

--Brian Van Winkle
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**FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES REAL ESTATE SECTION TO THE NEW REAL ESTATE AGENCY AND ESTATE MAGAZINE**

Civil developers start moving Interest in design. Does this mean New York will be get better contemporary architecture? Is this new trend sustainable?

> It depends on the reader's views given to the word "design." City Planning Commissioner Joe Rose's recent speech describing five ways to reform zoning includes an exception to the city's height and bulk limitations: a reward for exceptional design. "Let us install beauty into the powerful economic drive of this city's real estate entrepreneurs." Is he, too, taking up only one aspect of design, the wrapped, instead of the entire package? And why are we bribing developers with zoning bonuses in return for excellent design?

> Why don't we expect good design "as of right"? The ultimate result of a developer's focus on design defined one-dimensionally in stick corporate marketing for the developer-oriented project.

—Brian Van Winkle

irfiswar Wert art net

> The question is: to whether developers' interest in "design" will benefit New York's architecture of the future will depend largely on what is meant by "design." Good design needs to be defined and put to the minds and talents of developers and other concerned "designers."

I would prefer to think that New York and for that matter other cities throughout the world will be getting "better" architecture but from what. I see in the international media, our trend seems too be for "faster, boxier and smaller" citiescapes. I hope I am wrong.

—Bill Wheatland

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Chairman of City Planning Joseph B. Rose has proposed significant reforms in New York City's zoning ordinance. Among them are new height and bulk rules, as well as an exemption that has raised a few eyebrows:

The public process should be able to grant waivers from some regulations on the basis of exceptional design. Let us instill the quest for beauty into the powerful economic drive of this city's real estate entrepreneurs. If that extra height is so important, let it be the developer's architect who earns it, not his lawyer.

Unfortunately, the public sector everywhere has a pretty dismal record when it comes to involving itself in subjective aesthetic decisions and the subject is fraught with practical and legal pitfalls. But if we can bend over backward on behalf of great old buildings, I am confident we can figure out how to do so for great new ones too.

To that end, (and hopefully to avoid the mistakes other cities have made in this area) I will be convening an advisory body to help us figure out how we can prudently introduce such values into our zoning.

Should these aesthetic decisions be within the purview of the planning commission? Should there be a new design commission? At the same time there are rumbles that the city's art commission may be done away with taking a look at our contemporary public art and design, do you think this appointed body is serving its constituency? How can design be legislated?

When the Efficient Tower was first proposed it was widely reviled. The Seagram building, Lever House are sublime; hundreds of clumsy glass towers across the U.S. are banal, at best. Most people have difficulty noticing the difference. The round, all glass 101 California office tower has been simultaneously rated the best and worst building in San Francisco in people's choice polls.

Aesthetic revisions are not objection, thousands of years of philosophical traditions tell us the contrary. What may be calling edges, perhaps beautiful, even transcendent to one person, may seem an abhorrent sensory assault to another. How do we know what is good, what will pass the test of time? To be blunt, we don't always know.

But this is no reason to shrink our collective responsibility to think, to push, to look in the future, and to celebrate innovation and beauty in every form.

We can no more assure success in the design realm than we can in the stock market. Perhaps, though, we might trust our design instincts - acknowledged design professionals as we trust our money to financial professionals, and offer the space of time, more often than not, we will profit.

Of course, the city is different than a financial instrument, and in a city in which people live and work's decisions and the right house for such risk and experimentation?

Yes. We must take chances. Great, not to mention good, architecture is always a reflection of its time, both technically and intellectually, otherwise it is stagnant, even pedestrian. Cities are living entities that grow and change, they are a reflection of the world surrounding them.

Now, such a thought does not sit well in many quarters, and the view from oh-so-cute San Francisco is particularly jaundiced. In this city which loves itself to no end, Victorian styles that emerged from expedient pattern books in the 19th century are laminated in nearly every new building. New and modern buildings are declared an ugly and out-of-character. And, in the downtown, a well-intentioned requirement that buildings have articulated tops has led to a skyline marked by silly hats. Design review is arbitrary and, as a result, designs of architects and architects of design and design in neighborhoods with no regard to aesthetic value.

The clear lesson from San Francisco is this context is that good design has little to do with politics and should be far removed. To implement the proposed New York waiver program will require no small amount of political will for it will entail releasing waiver decisions from the political realm to the very subjective design.

And, in this where it should reside. A broad spectrum design commission with architects, artists, and urban designers (politicians need not apply), all professionals and all practitioners noted in their fields, should be left alone to make informed decisions, to take risks and challenge orthodoxy's if need be. Vision, beauty, and wonder should be encouraged and rewarded. Such is the legacy of any great city.

- EVAN ROSE
Evan Rose is a senior associate with Steven Martin-Vega
Wells/Peter Mori in San Francisco and was formerly
senior urban designer for that city's planning department.

Two News Stories

That broke one day in late September frame Commissioner Rose's plans to introduce aesthetic judgment into the city's zoning process, and suggest why that idea would best be forgotten.

In the first story, published in The Post under the headline "Art Attack," Mayor Giuliani threatened to cut funding from the Brooklyn Museum if it proceeds with plans to work the show of those young British artists who sometimes wear to pig cropping and accoutrement seeming in their pursuit of beauty.

Giuliani would add New York to that list of cities in Cincinnati, Washington, D.C. - where government dictates what we experience in art. His rationale? It offends me.

Note the preposterous in a city where public bureaucracy can be dominated by personal will, why would we introduce a layer of official taste between the possibilities of an empty lot and the promise of the skyline? Imagine the reaction to a building that peddles for extra floors, but adds value community-building effect. Would it shock the panel into censure? Decision is art - yes, I'm being generous by throwing our architecture in with it - it should be left to citizens artists doing what they do, where they will, as best they can. The check of the bottom line and the balance of public taste are just part of that game.

If you in government wish you trust not to Seed the rules?

In the second news story, Donald Trump announced plans to display sculpture from the city's museums in the plaza of his newly-purchased General Motors Building. It was, of course, Trump's latest residential tower that inflated the mandates of Beekman Place and got this debate rolling. At GM, as if stealing a march on the city, he's learning to place with art. But Trump builds as he builds, and no incentives will give him; nor anyone else, good taste. There is even the likelihood, given the weight of the dollar in this city, that developers will scrum with a system of aesthetic review the way they have learned to abdicate air rights and diddle plaza bonus. Who in the private sector would you trust not to bend the rules?

Ugly buildings, mean buildings, bad buildings: all are just bauble products of the city - what the market will bear - and New York can bear a great many of them. One reason to support a design review panel would be to save the ingenuity used to sodden that body, and the new breed of freakish buildings that would result.

In Union Square there is an example of one such freak, a giant new facade sculpture called "Metronome." Since it began to beef its long-promised column of steam earlier this month, I actually find it rather charming, but it does seem to be generally enjoyed; it has already earned, for its central distinguishing feature, an unflattering nickname: "The Office." Bad art? Maybe, but we should welcome this - and all - touches of the surrealism within the potently equalizing monetary of the grid. It hasn't ruined anything. And as Union Square absorbs "Metronome" as part of a grander pageant, Beekman Place could quietly endure shadows as the price for dynamism, and the mayor might begin to tolerate difference as a trade-off for governing this magnificent and reliably resilient city. Who would I trust to shape New York? Only the city itself?

- PHILIP NOBLE
Philip Noble is a New York-based freelance writer.

I believe that exemption for buildings of "exceptional merit" or "significant value" could certainly work if the new body is responsible for conferring this status were comprised of informed professionals with the appropriate backgrounds.

These sort of decisions need to be made by
At times, errors are made in judging scale and context, and we err on the side of caution or the jokers’ team. To always be right is stifling—it is essential to push the boundaries beyond what is considered safe or acceptable, beyond the status quo.

PHILLY SIMBER

Phyllis Lambert is the founding director and chair of the Board of Trustees of the Canadian Centre for Architecture.

ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN has been used as a lever to extract maximum entitlement advantage from municipal authorities nationwide. Yet, uniqueness in American architecture since the 1950s has been synonymous with the anti-urban, personal, modernist project visions of star architects. At an increasing pace, zoning rules and project-focused architectural design have been used by developers and their architects for personal advantages and to the detriment of the public good. The instrument that was meant to guarantee order in urban development has become the means of destabilizing the form of cities nationwide.

NEVER has there existed such a gap between the values of the architectural elite in this country and the values of the citizens who are the owners of their architecture. Never has there been such a disparity between those who benefit from the fruits of the creators and the creators themselves. The two are crucially related and are feeding the truly irrational and ominous public process regulatory development.

The New Urbanism has been defined as a movement to reclaim urban centers and to contain peripheral sprawl. Concerned in the new urban agenda is the development of vibrant towns and cities that are both public space-centered and possess a continuous fabric of buildings. A new definition of codes and codification is necessary if we are to accomplish such a reformation of urban development and reeducation.

New urbanists take an entirely different approach to the matter of controlling urban form. What is valued above all else is the street. The dense, gemmating maintenance of the Seagram Building requires that artworks placed from time to time on the Seagram Plaza must be approved by a representative of Moma. Philip Johnson has acted in that capacity.

SEATTLE can serve as a case model for New York as it determines an exemption process for "exceptional design." If the preservation of great height and scale for "great beauty" was pursued in Seattle, I speculate that the process would be as follows. The City Council and mayor would initiate the Seattle Design Commission, and the City Planning Board of the Downtown Neighborhood Design Review Board and the Planning Commission to lead an advisory group of stakeholders representing a city-wide constituency. A series of public workshops, presentations and discussions would focus on the existing code, the new downtown neighborhood comprehensive plan, and the existing pieces of an urban design plan. National models, evaluation criteria and shared aspirations for the downtown would be reviewed. This activity would be lead by citizens and staffed by the newly established Design Center.

The result of this public discussion would be a twofold. A long-needed downtown urban design plan would be adopted. A public process for project evaluation would be implemented, guided by the aspirations and principles of the downtown comprehensive plan, a new urban design plan, and the tools provided by the code. The project method would be examined and future values in the development of the downtown would not be limited by the zoning code, but would structure a broad discussion of environmental and urban design issues. The evaluation mechanism would be a joint committee in the Seattle Design Commission and the Downtown Design Review Board. The public review would involve a sequence of presentations starting early in project development.

For thirty years, the Seattle Design Commission has reviewed all projects in the public realm. As an advisory body, the commission is able to freely discuss the range of issues influencing the development of an urban environment and provide aebtive advice the council and mayor. In the 1980s, the Neighborhood Design Review program was established to review private projects of specific types, consider code departures and more closely fit a project with its context. The commission and review evaluate sympathetic work in concert to develop a balanced discussion on urban development, allowing departures from the code in the context of a more thorough discussion of urban design issues. If this discussion on "great beauty" were to occur in Seattle now, it would occur in the context of a heightened interest in urban development. Seattle neighborhoods have recently completed a grass-roots neighborhood planning effort (17 plans). The downtown core is alive with people. Hundreds of citizens attend the hearings associated with the selection of architects for the new city hall, the new libraries and the aquarium. Conversations on the former result in sophisticated belief and environmental discussions. The skill with which these discussions suggest a community which could have this discussion and produce tools to manage height, bulk and beauty, maybe the best results of years of the "Seattle process."

BARRA SWIFT

Landscape architect Barbara Swift is the past Chair of the Seattle Design Commission.
This fall the Institute's programs continue to explore the question posed in this Van Alen Report:

On Tuesday, November 9 at 6:30 P.M., the question will be thrown out for public debate. Presenters for this panel discussion include Feed (www.feedmag.com) Editor-in-Chief Steven Johnson, Harvard professor and chronicler of New York's "private public spaces" Jerald Kayden, and Internet thinker and author of The Control Revolution Andrew Shapira.

On Monday, November 22 at 6:30 P.M., design critic and author Jan Abrams will speak about the changing definition of public experience. Abrams will moderate presentations by architect Kader Kadi and interactive media artist Antonio Muntadas, whose projects look at the intersection of public, private and virtual space. Kadi will present Memory/Basi: Anarchitect's Entry Project, a digitally-based investigation where architecture is excerpted from its historical context and systematically reformatted to create new, synthetic realities. Muntadas, whose recent works includes On Translation: The Internet Project (adweb.walkerart.org/kfhtml/muntadas/) an exploration on communication, will present Protected Space/Public Space.

Almost 200 entries from 72 countries have been received for the competition.

The goal of the competition is to develop transitional housing solutions for refugees in the wake of the recent conflict in Kosovo. The jury is comprised of architects Steven Holl, Billie Tsien and Tod Williams, as well as relief experts Elise Sturck of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Herb Scriver of the Open Society Institute.

Organized by the relief organization War Child USA and New York firm Christians Lauterbach Architects, the competition was launched by activist Bianca Jagger at the Institute this summer. The organizers intend to build prototypes of the premised submissions. The winners will be announced at the opening of an exhibition of selected entries at the Van Alen Institute on November 11 at 6:30 P.M. Entries will also be shown at USAID headquarters in Washington, D.C., the French Institute of Architecture, Paris; Royal Institute of British Architects, London; and at locations in Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Bucharest, Romania; and Venice, Italy. For more information see www.archfromhumanity.com. Those interested in contributing financially to the effort should call War Child at 212-614-3515.