

Where's Art in Planning?

by Ric Stephens

"Art is the Queen of all sciences communicating knowledge to all the generations of the world."

— Leonardo da Vinci

We are immersed in the "art" of our times – the fine art, music, literature, commercial design, symbolism, and patterns of human activity that define our communities. Art, in all its various forms, helps give our lives meaning and enjoyment.

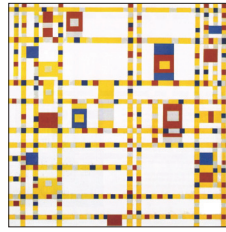
Yet you will rarely find art referenced in a development code or zoning ordinance, and very few comprehensive plans will even mention it. In the rare occasions where public art is included in planning, it is often more of an afterthought.

Why Has Planning So Often Ignored Art?

I believe planners have ignored art for three principal reasons:

1. *Consideration of art does not match our traditional approach to planning.* Our basic tool is a map or site plan – an orthographic perspective of a place that is never experienced by anyone. Music, sounds, scents, movement, and other personal experiences cannot be depicted. We regulate noise, glare, and so on, but do not consider a broader spectrum of environmental experience that would include art.

Technical planning is often a collaboration of planners, urban designers, architects, engineers, and landscape architects, but seldom if ever includes artists. That need not be the case. I recently participated in a project in Rijswijk, Holland, where we used a Mondriaan painting as the inspiration for a community plan. Master planning for the City of Poznan in Poland highlighted the analogy to music to inspire its citizens in planning for their city. The cover of the plan document is not a traditional city view, but a sheet of music! Regional planning



The patterns in Dutch artist Piet Mondriaan's paintings (such as Broadway Boogie Woogie, above left) provided insights for planners in developing a concept plan (above right) for a network of streets and canals for the City of Rijswijk. For more: www.isocarp.org/index.php?id=154.



for Tokyo included a series of haiku that were presented in meetings to engage the public.

2. *Planners have often ignored art because it cannot be easily quantified.* We can describe a building envelope or floor to area ratio, but how would we require and evaluate a cultural element? Is one performance stage equal to two fountains or three mosaics? Who is to say what kind of art is esthetic or appropriate? For these reasons, planning commissions are often uncomfortable when the hearing ventures into discussion of public art.

Yet despite the complexity of assessing the quality of public art, it can be measured in terms of increased property values, public participation, employee/visitor satisfaction, and many other indices.

3. *Planners exclude art because it implies emotion and subjectivity.* We believe planning must be rational and objective. We can describe a parking requirement as a function of commercial square footage, but we are uncomfortable, if not incapable of, describing how a place can contribute to our cultural experience.

As a relatively new field, planning

wishes to be recognized as a legitimate profession adhering to scientific principles. Instead of Part A connects to Part B, we have Zone R-1 is compatible to R-2. This model may build a functional machine, but will it yield a vital community?

Planning Should Embrace Art

Art is largely absent in planning. This need not be the case. Planning should broaden its scope to embrace art.

This can be as simple as asking for any given project: "Where is the art?" Is the lighting purely functional, or could it be dramatic? Does the signage provide basic way-finding, or could it help with the community's visual identity? Does the street merely meet the development code, or could an innovative paver treatment enhance the sense of place?

I am not advocating a nostalgic return to the era of the City Beautiful Movement, but the pendulum has swung far from this attempt to reshape and revitalize communities through infusing the built environment with art. Planning commissioners may have a new and more valuable view of planning if they view it as not only a technical exercise, but as community design art. ♦

Ric Stephens is Principal for Stephens Planning and Design in Beaverton, Oregon. His column appears regularly in the Planning Commissioners Journal.



Editor's Note: Do you know of other examples of art being used in planning? Visit our Resource page at: www.plannersweb.com/art.html and add your feedback.