

# LANDWRIT

## New Places for a New Age

PHILIP N. LOHEED AND  
BRANDY H.M. BROOKS

**Instead of isolation, we are faced with the pressing reality of a single, rapidly evolving, global and multiethnic culture. What happens in one part of the world, whether economic, political, cultural, or environmental, affects all other parts. Unfortunately, current development regulations and design strategies remain legacies of the era of isolation. How might planning and settlement patterns be altered to house this integrated world?**

GENERAL PLANNING IN THE 20TH CENTURY can be summed up in one word: isolation. It began with the sweatshop-era idea of isolating uses—residential from industrial, office parks from retail districts, swaths of green space from everything else—so that, through the wonders of the automobile, where we live has no relation to where we work, shop, or play. From 20th-century America evolved the view that we should live without regard for connecting places, extending the sense of isolation not only to zoning districts but also to specific sites, so that what was created on one site need not relate to anything on surrounding parcels. Each site became a self-contained world of its own, reaching out only to the collector road nearby.

A series of at-risk site studies recently commissioned by the town of Lincoln, Massachusetts, illustrates some effects of isolation. At each of several large properties, the existing uses—based on 20th-century, car-based practice—are compared with possible alternative uses: single-family residential within the default two-acre zoning limits; affordable housing (using Chapter 40B, Massachusetts's anti-snob zoning law); mixed use (retail/office/restaurant, church, private school); and so on. Only wetlands and steep slopes are considered a constraint on any of these uses. Typically, the only access to these properties is from a state highway. The town may easily be forgiven for rejecting all of these options as simply scattered pockets that would eventually consume the entire land base with disconnected "pods in the buffer network." Further, these pods would tend to be "set pieces" created by a single developer and design team—for example, buildings surrounded by parking lots surrounded by buffer plantings connected to highways; or layer upon layer of privatized turf, embedded in remnants of the landscape. Even the various new urbanist communities

tend to assemble such suburban projects, modified by a series of trendy "looks" to create pseudourbanism—all with plenty of parking "out back."

As we move deeper into the 21st century, however, the name of the game has changed; instead of isolation, we are faced with the pressing reality of a single, rapidly evolving, global and multiethnic culture. The global culture dominates the biosphere with a logarithmically escalating effect; connections and relationships cannot be ignored, because what happens in one part of the world, whether economic, political, cultural, or environmental, affects all other parts. The built environment requires sustainable solutions that meet the needs of a network of people. Through it all, the biosphere must remain functional and intact. Unfortunately, current development regulations and design strategies remain legacies of the era of isolation. How might planning and settlement patterns be altered to house this integrated world?

Any network, whether made up of spaces or people, has three key components to consider: the parts, the core, and the relationships. The parts have a series of distinct elements, each with its own characteristics. To bring the parts together requires some sort of core—a common resource, a central idea, an organizing element—that brings the parts close enough to connect with one another. These connections, or relationships, can take two forms: the relationship of the parts to the core, or the relationship that individual parts may develop with each other or with other parts that touch the network. The key concept in any network is shared connections. Pooling of resources in a networked community makes the whole far more capable and competitive than any one part could be if isolated.

Possibly, neighborhoods can be designed deliberately as people and production net-

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works, and interconnected internally and to the biosphere; or as places that encourage serendipity and creativity and maximize diversity, and that celebrate their relationship to the landscape they inhabit. Our new development strategy allows for unexpected maverick parts to be present while simultaneously protecting the network and its environment. Most important, this strategy needs to be fully mobilized and to enable all of the people in the network. To succeed in the global economy, all people in the network must be connected.

To build an urban fabric that works, we must first have the pieces. However, a single developer or designer cannot create them wholesale at one time. What is needed instead is old-fashioned microinvestment—a varied collection of individuals bringing their skills and resources into the community and contributing to its development. Enter the mavericks—buildings that are flexible in use but designed to coordinate with one another to create coherent public environments.

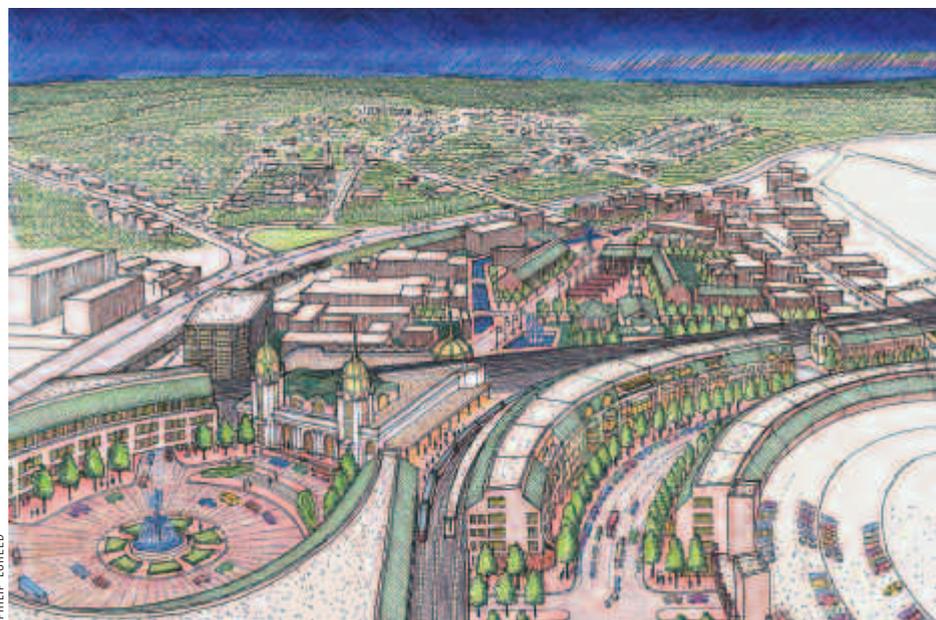
To illustrate the possible nature of maverick buildings, consider a street like Newbury in Boston, a neighborhood like Adams Morgan in Washington, D.C., or the row buildings of the Haussmann-era of Paris. From all of these areas evolved a complex mix of residential, commercial, artistic, and institutional uses in buildings that are “networked” by relating to one another, creating and defining important parts of the public realm, and, less frequently, important natural areas. In each of these examples, the maverick buildings, along with public and natural areas, establish a pattern, and were built lot by lot.

In this hypothetical urban fabric, macroinvestment is directed toward building the core elements that bind together the community. Large public and private investors provide both the attractors and the efficient resources for the mavericks of the urban



PHILIP LOHEED

**This concept for the development of Worcester Center in Worcester, Massachusetts, pairs a street of maverick buildings (lower right) with the public space of Union Station (lower left and at left).**



PHILIP LOHEED

neighborhood: a train station complex, multi-faith forums, public markets, urban parks, and so on. When large parcels are developed, the master developer itself should not design more than 10 to 20 percent, and instead should market parcels to, and manage the coordination of, the mavericks.

The common core is as essential to the urban community as the maverick investors are. First, it creates neutral territory where participants can function freely without invading anyone else's space. This is necessary for building the relationships that form the community network. One of the biggest problems

with 20th-century isolationist planning was that it provided no public place for the casual social interaction required to build relationships with strangers. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs made the case more than 40 years ago that these passing interactions are key to building public trust and a shared responsibility for the neighborhood. Without a common reason to meet and a common place to meet in, relationships in the network of an urban community are never established, and the community will not be competitive with those that have this advantage. Examples of this sort of public environ-

ment include any of the world's great streets, and, in particular, places of public hospitality—such as Union Station in the District of Columbia and Grand Central Station and the redeveloped Bryant Park in New York City—which allow residents and visitors alike to be fully mobilized and functional in spite of any cultural or class differences among them.

Large public/private investors can help build a public place. For a resource to bring a community together, (1) it must be shared, public, and open; (2) it must meet the needs of a variety of users within the community; and (3) it must allow all users to feel a sense of welcome, belonging, and citizen participation. Neutral places can include market spaces, cultural spaces, recreation facilities, centers of knowledge and communication, or spiritual places. Whatever the type, it must meet all three of the qualifications listed above.

Neutral places are the least understood and often the most problematic of the requirements of our new system. Not only must a neutral place be available or provide diverse services, but also it must allow users to feel that they have a right to use its resources. The signals that indicate a user does not belong are subtle but powerful: language, codes of behavior and appearance, separation of special needs, and barriers that make services difficult to access are all implicit but clear indicators that those who do not fit the norm may be tolerated, but are not invited. The destructive isolation that results breaks down the communication that builds the community,

effectively blocking out the full range of skills and resources that could be provided by those who have been socially shut out.

To understand, in practice, how mavericks and neutral places have worked, it is instructive to examine one of the world's great places that was built using this model.

Early in the 19th century, the British Crown dispatched an emissary in the person of Colonel Stamford Raffles to the Far East to establish a viable trading base to compete with the Spanish and Portuguese in Hong Kong and Macao.

The various ethnic Kampongs (neighborhoods) of Singapore began to evolve after a “trading factory” agreement was signed between Raffles and the Sultan Hussein as part of a plan for a free port in 1819. The “clientele” for the free port consisted mainly of migratory pirates from a wide variety of ethnic groups all over the region, who needed a the free port that was convenient, and who were entirely capable of enforcing their will through violence.

In June 1819, Raffles developed a plan to divide the town into communal areas for the various pirate traders, which culminated in his instructions of November 4, 1822.

“The Instructions included directions that streets were to be laid out in regular right-angled grids wherever possible. Houses were to have a uniform front and ‘a verandah open at all times as a continued and covered passage on each side of the street,’ stipulations which were to result

in the singularly unique character of Singapore and, later, Malaya.”

—*The Singapore House* by Lee Kip Lin

Today, the Kampongs are among the world's more stable ethnic neighborhoods—and perhaps constitute the world's largest collection of live/work (shop/house) residential buildings. They give the city virtually an unparalleled and celebrated range of ethnic foods, languages, schools, religious institutions, costumes, theaters, retail, cultural traditions, and the like.

The success of the trading factory was based on the dual concepts of convenience and neutral territory: all the pirates found it convenient to have a place where they could sell their loot without having to fight their way in and out of town past their piratical peers. Such economic and social mobility enjoyed by traders and their celebratory attitude toward diversity have carried over to their descendants.

The information age is enabling members of the global culture to understand their relationship to the planet and to each other, and to adjust their behavior to suit it. We have entered into a time of reflective consideration: What global impacts are we having on our society and the environment? Can the negative impacts be slowed, stopped, or reversed? Is an economy possible that fits the available resources of the biosphere? What better ways to create places are available? Will violence continue to be a dominant force in the future?

We are in a struggle to prosper within new rules. To succeed, we will need to mobilize every resource of human intelligence available—we must learn to “fire on all cylinders” culturally. In this regard, the diversity of our people is a precious competitive resource that must be conserved. Maverick microinvestment and neutral places can play a useful part in achieving this goal, providing spaces for the new ideas and new people who will help build sustainable solutions for the future. **U**

**Ethnic neighborhoods in Singapore are among the world's largest collection of live/work residential buildings, offering a range of ethnic foods, languages, schools, religious institutions, theaters, retail, and cultural traditions.**

**PHILIP N. LOHEED** is principal of Loheed Design Partnership in Somerville, Massachusetts. **BRANDY H.M. BROOKS** is marketing director of Loheed Design Partnership and a student at the Boston Architectural Center.



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