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Urban Excellence

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with Robert G. Shibley and Polly Welch



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Lessons of the First Rudy Bruner Award Competition

What is excellence in the urban environment? The Bruner Foundation will be exploring this question for many years as new groups of selection committee members present the Rudy Bruner Award to places they consider outstanding. Not all the answers are in, and it is possible that juries will differ substantially in how they approach the question. But certainly the selection committee for the first Rudy Bruner Award competition sent clear messages about what its members believe make an urban place excellent.

The selection committee evaluated urban projects in terms of three elements: *products*, *processes*, and *values*. One important component of excellence in product was *effective physical design*. Effective physical design can include any of a large number of qualities; it varies with the circumstances and with the purposes that the place serves. One of the common ingredients in effective design, the selection committee indicated, is a good relationship with its surroundings. The Fairmount Health Center accomplished this by saving an old automotive building and turning it into a showpiece; the health center demonstrates the potential for reuse of Philadelphia's old buildings and inspires pride in a neighborhood that is more accustomed to neglect. It encourages people to look upon the surrounding neighborhood with a new optimism about what can be done, both physically and socially. Casa Rita responded to its surroundings by converting, cleaning, and repairing a vacant old building, but without calling a great deal of attention to the building; a shelter for homeless women and their children is better for its residents and its neighborhood when it is pleasant-looking but not conspicuous. Quality Hill in Kansas City initially impressed the selection committee because it reused a large number of derelict historic buildings and put compatible new structures on empty land close by. Although the selection committee expressed misgivings about some aspects of the physical design, such as the closing of the architecturally important entrances in some of the old buildings and the

scarcity of household outdoor space behind some of the new housing, Quality Hill managed to create a coherent neighborhood out of what was becoming a wasteland.

In most instances, the selection committee found virtue in buildings that did not insist on being the star of the urban scene. Lavish architecture is usually not an essential ingredient of urban excellence. Cities need not deck themselves out in ostentatious up-to-the-minute architecture in order to become satisfying places. St. Francis Square is not elaborate in its form or its finishes; it was built on a tight budget, and the apartment buildings do not call much attention to themselves. But the design of the buildings is skillfully suited to the serving of human needs—the core purpose of any design. The buildings cluster six apartments around each stairwell, forming a cohesive social unit. The three-story buildings shape the landscape into courtyards where children can play without direct supervision and where residents can easily get to meet their neighbors. The scale of the complex—299 units covering the equivalent of three city blocks—lends itself to community activity and sharing of responsibility. The circulation system permits nonresidents to walk through St. Francis Square, enhancing the public pleasures of the city; at the same time, it positions walkways where criminal activity would probably be seen and thus deterred.

Pike Place similarly reflected the selection committee's conviction that architecture need not be grand or strikingly original to be satisfying. The committee appreciated Pike Place's use of relatively mundane old buildings that do not proclaim their own importance but that do connect current Seattle residents to the city's past. Among preservation projects involving commercial buildings, Pike Place is somewhat unusual in that the buildings have purposely been kept relatively utilitarian, not gussied up and thus deprived of their original atmosphere—the unfortunate fate of commercial buildings in many historic districts across the country. Pike Place's utilitarian buildings have stayed true to their long-time temperament. This is one of the lessons the first Rudy Bruner Award held for preservation projects. Even as old buildings have been conserved and new ones added at Pike Place, the buildings have not been made the entire focus of the preservation effort. There is an understanding that buildings (and their open spaces) are primarily a stage upon which human activities take place.

The overall design of Pike Place is largely a hodgepodge, an outgrowth of many decisions over several decades. But the hodgepodge works, and preserving it was a stroke of good fortune. The way the walkways wind around, the way the concourses are partly indoors, yet in contact with the weather, contributes to the market's vitality. The market engages the senses and encourages continuing exploration. Another successful aspect of Pike Place's design is the packing together of buildings that suit many different functions—housing, retailing, and social services among them. This makes for stimulating interchange among those who use or live in the market area.

In terms of product, then, the places chosen by the 1987 selection committee generally reflect these principles:

- Urban buildings are better when they are sensitive to their surroundings.

- Fanciness and originality are not important values per se; they can be welcome when they serve a purpose but can be inappropriate or harmful when they do not.
- Preservation of old buildings is one possible component of urban excellence, in part because old buildings enrich a community's sense of history. Preservation is not an absolute value, however; sometimes new buildings are superior.
- Buildings are generally not to be esteemed as objects, but rather as places that make it easier for people to conduct their activities and fulfill their needs.

This last point deserves some elaboration. The selection committee was drawn to buildings and spaces that supported human activities, that served social purposes. Many of these were *basic needs*, such as temporary shelter for homeless women, affordable housing for low- to moderate-income families, and health care for those who might otherwise get inadequate treatment. Festival markets were criticized by the selection committee because it was felt that they tended too much toward the frivolous. As Theodore Liebman put it, "Chocolate chip cookies and balloons are not the future of life." Pike Place earned admiration for providing a senior center, a child care center, a food bank, a health clinic, and subsidized housing even while operating a major retail center filled with local people and a large number of tourists. The product, in other words, is not just a building and the spaces within and around it. The product may also be the services that this environment provides, and it may be the organizational framework that makes the pleasing physical design and the services possible.

The *processes* by which excellent places come into being and are managed vary widely. The selection committee particularly praised the processes that involved *broad participation or collaboration* among a number of different interests. In New York, Women in Need succeeded in bringing private businesses into the process of solving the homelessness problem. WIN reached out to the community, to social service agencies, and to others who could help Casa Rita meet its objectives of getting women and children housed and started onto a more solid footing in life. Quality Hill sparked interest because of its ambitious combination of partners, including city government, a neighborhood organization, local foundations, banks, corporations, and a private developer.

In several cases, the participation of a variety of parties affected the goals to be pursued. The Longshoremens' Union's participation enhanced the prospect that St. Francis Square would be designed with an integrated population in mind. The collaboration of architect with landscape architect resulted in a wholesome environment for family life, not just a collection of apartments.

The selection committee lauded places where the involvement of varied parties was more than perfunctory. The board of directors of WIN, for example, was drawn up to include individuals who possessed familiarity with one or another of the tasks that WIN and its shelters would have to take on. The board members were introduced to shelter residents, so that they could gather firsthand knowledge of the clientele. Consequently the board could exercise its powers more vigorously and intelligently. Sim-

ilarly, Casa Rita involved the residents in maintaining the shelter and gave them opportunities to fill paying positions both during and after their period of living in the shelter.

Pike Place exhibited elaborate processes of government and administration. The selection committee lauded the referendum process in Seattle, which put substantial power in the hands of citizens and allowed them to save the market despite strong opposition from the downtown business and political establishment. The selection committee found much to admire in the system of checks and balances that supervises the seven-acre market; this system distributed power among many different groups, allowing each of them to have their say. This system, as Robert G. Shibley and Polly Welch noted, has prompted the market's conservers to consult the market's guiding principles repeatedly when making decisions about changes in uses of the market or changes in its physical character. An organization—the Market Foundation—was established to capitalize on the market's broad public following by raising money for needed social services for the market's population. The economic process at Pike Place is exemplary. Rents reflect what Shibley and Welch dub the Robin Hood principle: charging higher rent to high-profit businesses and subsidizing the rents for farmers and socially beneficial enterprises like the day-old bread shop.

Processes that enhance flexibility and encourage democratic decision making won praise from the selection committee. St. Francis Square exemplified this with its cooperative structure, which permitted the residents to govern the apartment complex themselves, voting individual board members in or out, recalling the entire board, switching between a resident manager system and professional management, and altering the buildings and landscape in a great many ways. Shibley and Welch concluded that at Quality Hill, the developer's establishment of a neighborhood association holds the potential for involving residents of the entire Quality Hill area in dealing with common issues. In the finest places considered for the first Rudy Bruner Award, there has been a great deal of organizational flexibility over the years. The best example of this is Pike Place, where organizations such as the Friends of the Market have been able to play a leading role for a time and then step back as needs changed and other organizations came to the fore. Cities are not static. Outstanding urban places have to be able to cope with the inevitability of change.

The *values* embodied by the places in the Rudy Bruner Award competition can be seen both in the processes these places use and in the product—whether the product is a physical environment, a set of services, or a combination of the two. Diversity, particularly *intentional diversity*, is one of the values represented in the first Rudy Bruner Award.

The selection committee gave its strongest praise to projects that serve a broad cross section of society, including people of different ages, races, and income groups. Pike Place Market emerged as the winner partly because it has become a place for nearly everyone—for the low-income elderly who have long lived in the downtown area, for the area's farmers, for independent business operators, for artists and craftspeople, for local entertainers, for downtown workers, for gourmets, for middle-class people, for some wealthy people, and for tourists.

Note that tourists do not head the list. The selection committee com-

mended the market's organizers for keeping the importance of tourism in perspective—letting the tourists come but adopting policies to ensure that the market remains primarily a place for local people and local needs. This discriminating perspective on tourism is what is often lacking in “festival markets” such as New York’s South Street Seaport, where the prices, the variety of goods for sale, the attitude toward social services, and the overall organization of the market do not foster a cross section of the population the way Pike Place does.

Among the things that contribute to Pike Place’s greatness is its ability to attract people who are doing many different things. What is it these people do? The farmers sell produce directly to the customer, without a middleman. Operators of meat markets, fish markets, and other commercial enterprises sell goods to their customers in an often personal, sometimes entertaining fashion. Craftspeople create objects that they sell themselves—an opportunity, as with the farmers, to “meet the producer.” Restaurant operators and people from throughout the Seattle area shop for things they need, food items prominent among them. In addition to all the buying and selling—which by definition is the central activity of any market—people at Pike Place engage in many other activities as well. Older people socialize, keeping alive a network of relationships that underpins their personal well-being and benefits the entire market’s atmosphere. Some of them watch what goes on, acting as deterrents to crime. These older residents also enrich the market’s sense of history. Entertainers infuse the place with festivity—singing, juggling, playing instruments. In locations within the market area, medical personnel supply health care. Workers at the child care center supervise youngsters in play and learning. Pike Place functions, then, almost as a microcosm of society. Rather than shielding itself against the diverse people and activities of the city, Pike Place celebrates urban variety and makes it a civic attraction.

St. Francis Square in San Francisco is similar in that it, too, appeals to a wide range of people. From the start, it has been home to a mixture of races; whites, blacks, and Orientals form a functioning community. St. Francis Square has provided an appealing environment not only for families with both a husband and a wife but also for nonstandard households, notably including single-parent families. Its diversity has, if anything, increased over the years—with the age range expanding as the original residents grew older. Though low- and moderate-income families predominate, the regulations under which St. Francis Square operates have allowed residents to stay as their incomes have risen. In an America in which more and more housing developments are tailored to narrow segments of the population, the extent of racial, economic, age, and household diversity at St. Francis Square makes the Square stand out; the diversity contributes to its excellence.

Citizens of a democracy need a first-hand acquaintance with people from other segments of their society. Pike Place is a good example of an environment in which this broadening of our societal knowledge can come about. There is a directness to both the social exchange and the monetary exchange among the farmer and consumer, the craftsman and the customer, the entertainer and the public. The diversity is unencumbered by middlemen. Similarly, at St. Francis Square, blacks, whites, and Asian-

Americans deal with each other informally as neighbors and come together as to formally govern their complex. Intentional diversity, with ample opportunity for communication among people from different backgrounds, ranked as an important element in the judging for the first Rudy Bruner Award.

Another value found in many of these places is summed up in the term *empowerment*; the places encouraged people to exercise more political and economic power, exert more control over their own lives, or act more effectively as a community. In many cases this involved increasing the programs and possibilities available to women, poor people, immigrants, the elderly, and others whose needs might otherwise be neglected.

At Pike Place, the social services supported by the Market Foundation reflected a conviction that help should be offered to the aged residents of downtown Seattle, those with low incomes, and those with a need for medical care, child care, or companionship. Casa Rita and WIN displayed an eagerness to improve the opportunities for poor, homeless women and their children and also to prepare board members to wield their influence effectively. Fairmount Health Center tried to infuse pride—and with it the confidence to overcome a depressing urban environment—into the black and Hispanic population of North Philadelphia. St. Francis Square took those who might otherwise have been tenants and made them co-owners of their housing complex; the residents were given opportunities to shape and control their environment and to share in the ownership of it.

Pike Place was especially outstanding in the scope of empowerment that it offered. The market brought new opportunities to the poor, elderly, and immigrants, but it also expanded the opportunities of other groups and individuals: small farmers, independent local business people, and preservationists among them. The large number of organizations operating at Pike Place permit many people, in a wide range of pursuits, to have a voice in what takes place at the market.

Another value esteemed in some of the award recipients is *community*. There has been a lot of talk in recent years about “community”; the word is often applied to any group of people who have some interest or trait in common or who happen to live near one another. The places that ranked highest with the selection committee, however, have some way of actually functioning as a community. Community is not just a sentimental feeling that may turn out to be mostly an illusion; community is an outgrowth of policies and organizational practices. St. Francis Square is a community not only because its inhabitants live in close proximity to one another but also because they share in the responsibility for managing their complex; they come together in coop meetings and debate issues with their fellow residents. Pike Place abounds in organizations that bring the people concerned with the market together—whether as members of the Merchants Association, as Friends of the Market, as supporters of the Market Foundation, or as participants in some other group. Many of the urban places try to reach out, expanding their notion of community. At Quality Hill, it is significant that the neighborhood association was established to encompass not just the 4½-block project area but to include the unrenewed adjoining blocks as well. At Philadelphia Health Services, community groups are encouraged to use the facilities at Fairmount Health Center.

Women in Need has tried to link Casa Rita to other community and social service organizations in the Bronx.

The emphasis on community is linked to another value—*compatibility*. These places generally fit into their surroundings well. They do not try to pull away from their neighbors. The Pike Place Market is so compatible with its context that it is difficult for most people to know where the seven-acre market area begins and where it ends. The market connects itself to the streets and buildings around it and to the people who inhabit those surroundings. St. Francis Square, while retaining a strong identity of its own, is nonetheless a welcome place for outsiders. The physical design enables others to share in the pleasure of its grounds. Casa Rita modestly fits into its block of the Bronx. Fairmount Health Center stands out, but in a gregarious way—with expanses of glass and flags flying, inviting those in the neighborhood to feel themselves a part of what the health center is accomplishing. The selection committee debated whether two of these projects—Fairmount Health Center and Casa Rita—could properly be considered “places.” They were too small, some thought; they were just individual buildings. In the end, the selection committee decided that although these two might not be places in the same sense that Pike Place, St. Francis Square, and Quality Hill are, they embodied a kind of excellence and could serve as examples for people who are working with properties of similarly small scale. Not everyone can muster the resources to build a Quality Hill or a St. Francis Square. Many more organizations work on projects of limited size, and these organizations can find some worthy values in Fairmount Health Center and Casa Rita.

The competition of 1987 was a first attempt at identifying places that embody urban excellence. In future years, as the award continues to be debated and delivered, the Bruner Foundation hopes to learn more that will help Americans set goals for their cities. The initial award program uncovered evidence that cities across the country contain tremendous reservoirs of interest and talent. The Rudy Bruner Award demonstrates that people should look closely at the potential that exists in their own city. Some of that potential is the physical environment, as in the old buildings of Pike Place. Some of the potential is human—a Rita Zimmer in New York, a Victor Steinbrueck in Seattle, and a José Galura in Philadelphia, who are able to establish conditions that motivate people to make their cities better. Some of it is organizational—the ability of the Longshoremen’s Union and talented designers to collaborate on creating an integrated, affordable housing development in San Francisco in conjunction with an urban renewal agency.

Look around. We are not at a loss for resources.