

Gleaning inspiration from urban developments in smaller cities

In college, I remember a professor telling a studio full of aspiring architects that traveling was an essential part of being an architect. The reason being, she stated, was that it contributed to a designer's collective experience of places, a mental catalogue of sorts. Of all the things I absorbed back then, I'm reminded of this statement the most. Most obviously it re-occurs when I'm traveling to a new place. The benefit of traveling doesn't just live in the moment, however. Its true value presents itself upon return, where one can reflect and compare against the familiar "home."

Travel, unfortunately, has been limited for most everyone recently. The limited traveling I've been able to do has been for work. Like many local area architects, work isn't confined to the Rochester area. Road trips across the state have been commonplace for some time. Within the state, I have ventured to cities, towns and rural communities. Typically, it's "all business" with the task at hand the primary objective. Perhaps it's due to the past year's confinement, but whatever the reason, I've found my work trips to be much more contemplative than usual. Experiencing other upstate communities, their downtowns areas and special features have made me reflect on the current development happening within our own city. As a disclaimer, all the places I've traveled to recently are smaller (some significantly) than Rochester.

Downtown's buzz of construction activity suggests promising things. The inner loop parcels have taken shape, some even finished and occupied. The visual of a sunken highway giving way to revitalized development has captured the attention of national media, most notably a full feature in the New York Times. The central business district (or Center City or Tower District) also shows strong investment with Buckingham Properties Parcel 2 building (designed by Bergmann Associates) reaching a finishing point. The midtown block anchored by Sibley Square, the Metropolitan and Tower 280 have provided Rochesterians the most "big-city" metropolitan experience in decades. Local investment and planning have achieved the "build it" stage so far. The question remains: Will they come?

By comparison, Binghamton, Ithaca,



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Geneva and Syracuse are considerably smaller than Rochester, and perhaps they don't seem like areas we naturally size up to. Yet it's my recent trips to these places that have me wondering if we shouldn't be looking closer. These smaller cities seem to have capitalized on something that has evaded Rochester development: concentrated, focused development. These smaller metros have some truly beautiful urban and architectural spaces. While these spaces may only be a singular street or block, they are done extremely well. Human scaled, pedestrian oriented, timeless materials and quality construction. The Commons in Ithaca or Armory Square in Syracuse are prime examples of this. In both these models, it's the spaces between the buildings that make it so special. In Armory Square there is an abundance of hidden ally ways revealing unique storefronts or seating areas. Nooks and crannies within the urban fabric that feel more like a European experience rather than an upstate one. In Binghamton, Parlor City Commons is a pedestrian-only urban park that was once seemingly leftover space between the back of two blocks. The space has been transformed into a quaint, brick lined street that now appears to be the anchor of a very successful urban block in the small Southern Tier City.

Countless examples of this condensed, intentional urbanism exist across the state. Besides the intact historical facades, I imagine it is the reason why these smaller urban areas can attract visitors. Places like Skaneateles and Saratoga are no more than a few blocks in density, yet their streets have more urban panache that any in downtown Rochester. While it would be easy to dismiss this assessment as not an apples-to-apples comparison given the difference in urban sizes, it begs the question: Does size

matter?

The scale of new investment and development in Rochester is certainly something to be proud of, perhaps enviable by the cities I've mentioned earlier. However, the development and planning seem to be lacking the spaces that feel more intimate yet are inextricably public in nature. The design of grand plazas and thoroughfares do not a city make and are certainly plans we've tried our hand at before (urban renewal, etc.). Our region should always be striving to dream big and aspire greatly. Losing sight however, of the qualities that attract us to spaces and what makes them special is something that we seem to be forgetting. Filling voids is certainly something to celebrate but what if those voids become islands — disconnected and uninviting. Are we simply going for density? If so, will they come?

Sometimes, though, it really is all in the details. Interconnectedness of places and spaces start to build a collective memory of experience. Perhaps the smaller scaled moments I've mentioned will naturally develop in time as a next step in the urban ecology evolution. It would be interesting to see what happens if smaller-scaled, more focused design projects start to infiltrate the nooks and crannies. Can forgotten spaces in our urban fabric be transformed into the next Armory Square or Ithaca Commons? It would be a novel development strategy to look at a space through the lens of "addition by subtraction." Establishing little pockets of spaces that act as a connective tissue to all this disparate development could have mutual benefit for all parties. Maybe then, size really does matter for a place — just not the way we think.

Aristotle once said, "A great city should not be confounded with a populous one." Special experiences of place aren't dictated by the amount of people or the density of buildings. What makes an urban place so special is the discovery and uniqueness brought on by sharing space publicly. Paying attention to our smaller neighboring cities and communities may offer clues as to what successful placemaking is. For our urban core (and beyond), what will make it worth traveling to is focusing on the quality of the journey and not the size of the destination.

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