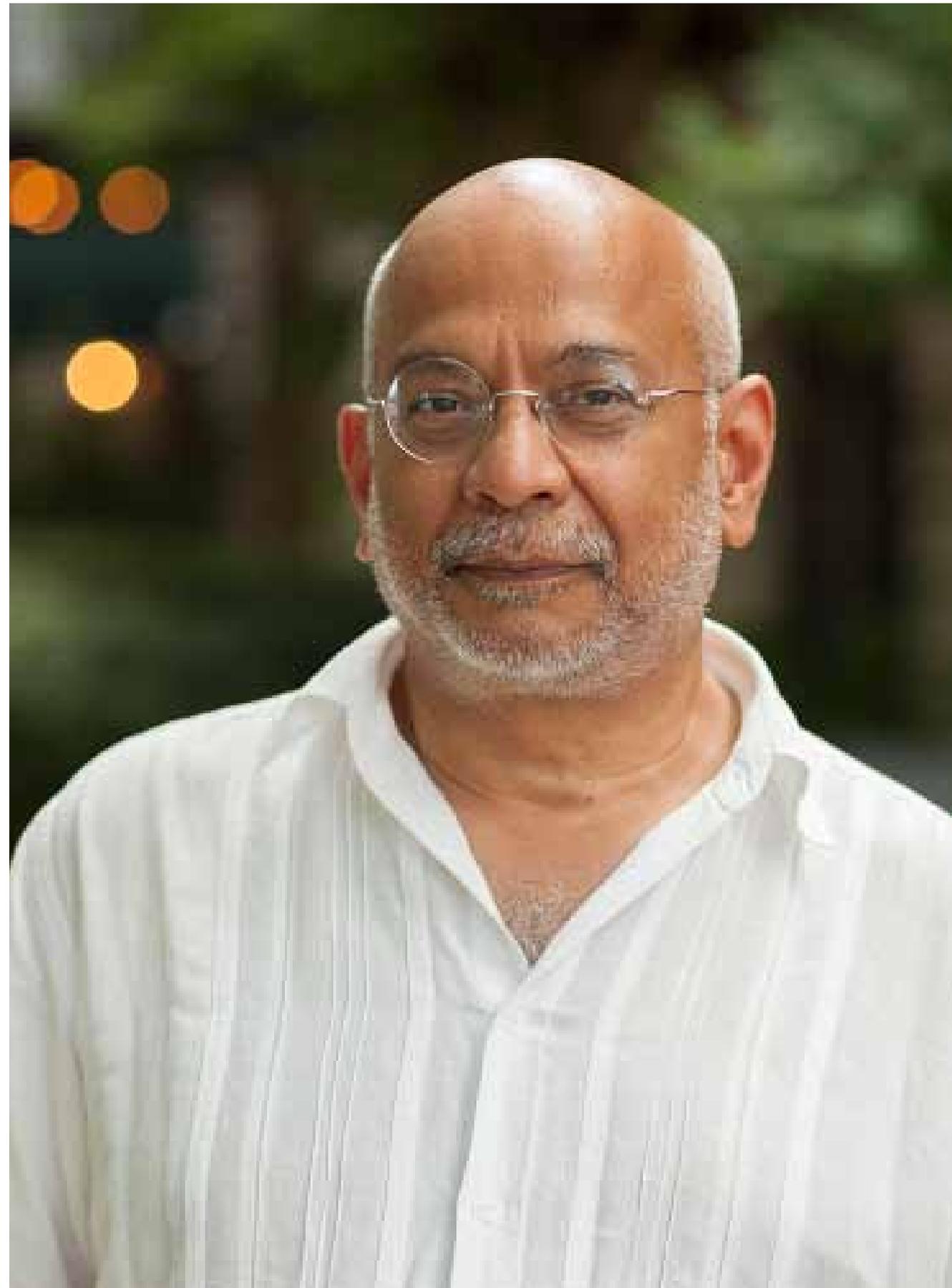


We don't
choose
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**Interview with
architect and urbanist
Dhiru Thadani**

By Jessica Bridger





Seaside town centre. Photo Jack Gardner



Model for Seaside. Photo Dhiru Thadani

There is something universal about urbanism. Not all cities are created the same, but they share underlying principles and precepts, according to architect and urbanist Dhiru Thadani. He is associated with the 'New Urbanist' movement in the United States, which advocates, among other things, transit-oriented development and the making of public spaces to achieve a sense of 'place' and a legible distinction between public and private realms within the city fabric.

His most famous book *The Language of Towns and Cities: A Visual Dictionary* is the result of many years of research conducted by Thadani and others, presented as a reference to specific-but-universal urban situations, in the form of case studies. His most recent book, *Visions of Seaside* is an in-depth examination of Seaside, the model town for the principles that New Urbanism espouses. Thadani works internationally as a consultant, educator and urbanist, helping to establish new settlements and to revitalize and restructure existing ones.

How did your book, *The Language of Towns and Cities* come about?

I see research as the fundamental starting point of any project. In all of my projects and design studios we start with research, immersing ourselves in the history and the physical and cultural context of the place. I accumulated a lot of material over time, and the book was a product of 25 years of this practice methodology. Friends and colleagues knew that I had this material and would often ask me 'do you have a plan for this, or do you have the figure-ground for that' and I eventually tired of going into my files to respond to these requests, so I assembled the material and published it for everyone to have.

I believe that today as an architect and planner you have to be an educator. You have to educate all the stakeholders: the client who commissions you; the government officials who approve the project; and the public who will use the building or space. Today there is much public participation and every decision is scrutinized. I believe that your project can only be as good as your client and the client base. If they do not understand the project, if they don't buy into the concept and you are unable to achieve a general consensus, your project is going to fail. It is incumbent on any designer or planner to bring people along, help them to understand the design. I would rather do that than the other approach, which is to say: 'you

don't understand it? You're not worthy, or that's just too bad because we understand it, we know the secret handshake, and you don't'. You can either educate people, or put people down and belittle them.

The book implies that there is a common language for cities and towns. Can you explain this further?

I have been fortunate to travel a lot and to work in many places. My general observation is that certain urban patterns are cross cultural. You find similar patterns – I am referring to the gross urban patterns. Universally we can all walk a certain distance or climb 'x' amount of floors, before we get tired, and cities have responded to these human conditions. Cities and urbanizing areas are developed for pretty much the same reasons all over the world: exchange of goods and culture, food security, community, education, access to transportation corridors. Those precepts for urbanization are pretty universal.

The differences are in the details. Thoroughfares exist as transit corridors but the way they are detailed is different from place to place, as the mode of transportation varies. The principles of urban form, for the most part are also universal. When you go into a new place, you can bring this body of knowledge, this theory of urban form, and then modify the details to the local conditions. You can go somewhere where security is a bigger issue, and you might have a compound wall in front of the building. In other places where it is more democratic or there is a higher set of laws you can bring the building closer to the street, it can be more porous.

This sounds quite logical, but we see so many newer developments that aren't very nice places. Why?

Generally, places built by one hand or one designer are not very nice places. Successful places, the places we like to visit, have been built incrementally over time. Today in the building of new places – urban developments – one is forced to make places in a compressed time span. I think the only way to achieve diversity is to hire multiple architects to build a place. As a planner or urban designer you're making the sandbox for many architects to play in. You're defining certain rules and ethics and codes of conduct, that's the role of the urban designer. It is not the role of the urban designer to design every building. One

architect making a framework plan and designing every single building is foolish and results in a large-scale architecture project – that is not urban design. These places are generally monotonous and no one wants to visit them.

If we think about the context of a place what should be taken into account?

As architects and planners we don't get to choose the sites we're given. And there are lots of places we shouldn't build on, or shouldn't build close to, but as a profession we're not in a position to turn down a commission even if it's in the wrong place. And that's just a fact of life. Every time I suggest that architects should have an ethical code that says, 'we shouldn't build there', I am ridiculed by my peers. I think in the future we should only be building in places that can be accessed by human powered 'walking' or transit, or build in places where there is a planned transit corridor.

We tend to build affordable housing on cheap land outside the urban core. This satellite housing impacts the poorest groups of society, who can't afford the transit costs, and they have the longest commutes, so that impacts their time too. They lose on two counts – time and cost of travel. There has been a misguided effort to build affordable housing on the outskirts of metropolitan centers, where the land is cheap. Right now in the US, it is staggering how much households spend on housing and transportation. The old equation used to be that you spend 25% of your income on housing. Today that number is close to 40%. Now that we've started to add transportation costs to the equation, we find that most Americans, especially in the lower income population group, are spending close to 60% of their income on housing and transportation. And that's no way to live.

How can we build better, smarter cities?

The first step is to infill underutilized land in urban centres. Secondly look for land close-in to the centre. There are many cities that have abandoned industrial areas, or areas that were isolated, either by lack of transit or through the construction of a highway. These areas are now fertile for redevelopment because they're geographically desirable locations, cut off by poor decisions made about 50 years ago. There also needs to be a balanced strategy between infill and development. I don't think that we're going to solve the

burgeoning urban population by just infill. I am a proponent of the densification of cities, and the better utilization of land, but that is only going to get us half-way there. We need to think about new settlements, and where those new settlements will be in the future. We need a multiple-pronged approach to solving what will be an unfathomable situation in 2050 when the global population is 9 billion and 75% of the population choosing to live in urban areas. The key is investment in transit infrastructure and in densification. You have to do it. And there's no time like now. People say 'this will take 50 years to pay back' but if these places are going to survive over the next hundred years, you have to make that investment, and not look at it like a short-term return, but instead take the long view.

Using Perm, Russia as an example of your consulting work, can you tell me a little bit about how that city's desire to become a 'knowledge city' informs its urban development, and how to counteract some of the pitfalls that you've discussed so far?

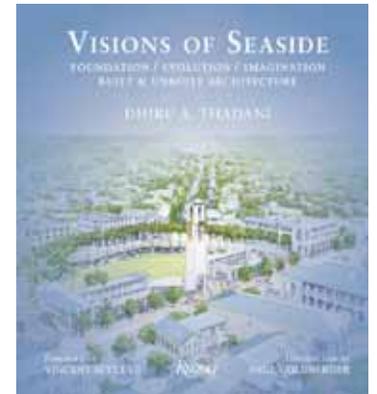
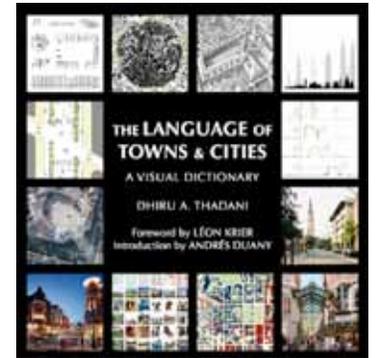
When I went to Perm with ISOCARP's Urban Planning Advisory Team (UPAT) the program given was to create a *knowledge city*. Some wanted the new knowledge city on the outskirts of Perm but the team recommended that they consider the existing city as their campus. One of the strongest drivers for economic development in a city is education, so the idea in Perm of bringing the university back into the city centre was the right decision. A setback in this proposal was that some existing universities were located outside of the city centre and they would have to reconsider their expansion strategies. I had the opportunity to share the information gleaned from my experience over the years with them. There's a section in my book on universities and college towns and how they can be thriving and vibrant places. Universities are robust economic engines. Every university student provides some income and financially benefits the lives of five residents in the city. The idea that Perm accepts the concept of being a knowledge city is exciting, and there's a lot of statistical data and factual information that prove that this strategy is a way to rejuvenate the city. Today it is common for industry to partner with universities for research. The universities can't afford the expensive equipment, and industry can't afford the labour to do

'This is a book that reminds us that Seaside was not born through the wave of a magic wand, but through an ordinary, imperfect, iterative process that kept adapting along the way. That it made numerous compromises just like any other development, even as it continued to aspire to the highest ideals of real-estate, design and community.'

Visions of Seaside is a must-read for every thinking urbanist—whether you are developer or architect, traditionalist or modernist, whether you like Seaside or not or want to create anything like it. It is a place you absolutely need to know about, but not through some casually made opinions on its picket fences and porches. You need to know Seaside for what it truly is—its facts, struggles, victories, shortcomings and presence.

Vinayak Bharne

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the research. It is an amicable symbiotic relationship for research and development. You also have a vibrant community around the universities, due to higher residential density, because students live in smaller areas. There's potential for growth and economic development in the city-as-campus model.

There are many cities all over the world where the main industry or the primary economic engine has disappeared – the factory closed – and these cities were unable to reinvent themselves. This is also happening in Perm with the weapon producing industries losing market share. The idea that Perm officials are looking at the next phase of the city's life, 'What can we be next', is admirable.

What else made Perm an interesting project, aside from the idea of making it a 'knowledge city' – in an existing city there must be existing conditions that inform the urbanism?

Perm has incredible bones and a strong framework plan. Unfortunately the buildings built more recently do not support or reinforce that framework. A lot of newer buildings were built with large setbacks, so you have large voids along the street edge. The continuity of the street wall is essential to define the public realm of the street. Streets are public spaces, they are outdoor rooms and they need to be defined by continuous building street walls. The continuity of the street wall helps make a comfortable place: you have the building wall; pedestrian corridor; shade trees adjacent to the sidewalk with the tree canopy making a secondary space; and then there is the thoroughfare for vehicular traffic. For this composition to work and feel good you need buildings that define the space. In the older parts of Perm this composition can be seen working harmoniously. There is potential in Perm to strategically retrofit buildings, making continuous street walls and well-defined streets, and to densify the underutilized land.

The second issue is that the civic institutions in Perm are grouped together in one area. Civic institutions should be spread throughout the city because different neighborhoods can gain their identity from those civic institutions, be it a place of worship, or a post office or a train station. By grouping all of those civic buildings and functions in one zone, it creates a mono-functional ghetto. There's opportunity to infill these zones

with housing, and to bring residents back to the center city, and reduce the suburb to city centre commute. Now, this condition exists in many cities – the core is a monoculture and it is dead after working hours, and the buildings don't support the urbanism. In Perm, I was excited to find a framework plan that had much promise, only the buildings needed to be altered to reinforce the intended urbanism.

Historically buildings have always been adapted to other uses than the use that they were originally designed for. This is a response to changing market demands and progress. Generally we only strive to save buildings that we love. Human-scale and well-crafted buildings tend to be lovable. There is an inherent quality embodied in certain buildings that inspires us to come together and say 'let's save this building'. The world over, there are buildings that have been adapted and saved, against all odds. It is the unloved buildings that get replaced and need to be replaced. Unfortunately with limited resources we can't afford to throw away buildings. We need to think of preserving, reusing and adapting. In my travels I have come across buildings that have had five to ten different uses in their lifetime; we need to learn from those buildings. Perm has its share of buildings that can be adapted and reused, and also buildings that will disappear over time because no one will want to save them.

Jessica Bridger is an editor for 'scape



Tadani (left) and other members of the ISOCARP Urban Advisory Team discussing the 'knowledge city' for Perm.



Old and new Perm.