The Language of Towns & Cities: A Visual Dictionary

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Introduction

By 2050 an additional 3 billion people will inhabit planet earth, making the total global population 9.1 billion. It is predicted that 75% this population will chose to live in urban areas. Will we continue to expand our cities or build new ones? What form will these cities take? Will they be auto dependent or pedestrian/transit friendly? Will they and can they be sustainable environments?

The author has been working on these issues for the past 30 years, striving to create pedestrian-friendly, transit-oriented developments that provide an antidote to automobile and strip-mall commercialism. The rediscovery of the 'art of place making' is a response to the post-WWII sprawling development patterns that resulted in acre after acre of auto-dependent, soulless, cookie-cutter subdivisions.

It is true that many inhabitants will always prefer an acre of land outside of the city with a three-car garage and a place to hide from the world. But the choice of a walkable, transit-friendly, mixed-use community should be available to all. This book shows designers, policymakers, real estate professionals, and students what the elements of a community are in an accessible, highly visual, fun-to-read volume that organizes the principles from A to Z.

The book covers areas of influence on urban ideas (such as A is for Arcadia, a region of ancient Greece) to specific design elements and dimensions suggested for the most inviting and livable community or building (such as A is for Arcade, which includes diagrams with suggested height to width ratios).

The clear ideas outlined in this book are even more important as we look for ways to decrease our dependence on fossil fuel resources (or at least try to find a way to avoid paying at the pump), and walkable, transit-oriented communities are at a premium (and some of the few places weathering the mortgage meltdown). The book provides up-to-date ideas for weaning ourselves from our cars (such as B is for bicycle-rental program and I is for infill and T is for Transit Oriented Development).

Summary

a. The book is an introduction and a reference tool for anyone interested in, or studying architecture, urban design, new urbanism, urban policy, and planning.
b. It is not a policy-based book, but rather the emphasis is on design and best practices are illustrated with images.
c. The thesis is that the traditional urban form is time-tested, resilient, and has been proven to be the most sustainable.
d. It is a book that every planning professional could use.

e. It sheds light on energy consumed by building, auto-transportation, and the resultant climate change.
f. The reader requires very little specialized knowledge as the text and the many graphics explain each concept clearly and concisely. Although some details, the block comparisons for example, may be of greater interest to students and practicing professionals than to the lay reader.
g. "An illustration is worth a thousand words," is the mantra of the book. It is unique because of the abundance of graphic material that is systematically organized. There is a plethora of diagrams and visual explanations in lieu of written words.

Audience

Architects, urban designers, planners, policymakers, citizen-activists, environmentalists, and students in these fields. Anyone concerned about the man-made and natural environments.

Topics

Many of the topics found in this book appear in other places in other forms, but not together in an accessible, highly visual format.

The author includes original ideas and his own drawings, and each word associated with the built environment is graphically illustrated, including elevation and section profiles and comparative plan drawings of several new and historic developments. Included are exhaustive analysis, images and measurements of complete streets, alternate means of commuting, and transit options.

Role of the book

The primary goal was to develop a lexicon of terms that related to urbanism. The fact remains that within the architecture and planning professions there is no common language or meaning for terms that are been used by professionals. Additionally, the real estate marketing industry had been misusing many words, such as center, park, boulevard, village, town, etc. The author's effort included researching the origins of these words and the correct usage. This book is an out-growth of that investigation and study. This is the first book of its kind, as there has been no comprehensive glossary on urbanism and no visual guide to what these words actually represent.

Feedback

Several schools of planning and urban design have already selected the book as required text for all their students. At 804 pages and in excess of 2,500 illustrations, the US$ 95 reference book is a tremendous value, especially in this day and age of extremely expensive text books.