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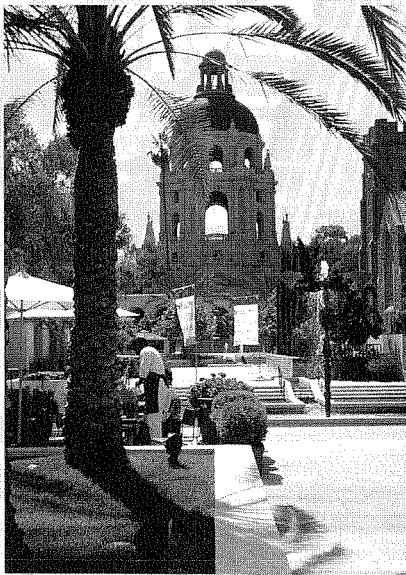
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PLACES OF PRIVILEGE

Robert S. Harris

Above: Coastal areas, with their fresh air and inspiring views, are places of privilege.

Below: Plaza de las Fuentes, Pasadena civic center.
Courtesy Robert S. Harris.



This article is adapted from a presentation made to the Mayors Institute on City Design West in October, 1993.

All the people of the city should inhabit places of privilege, that is, places that help them know and feel where they are and why it is good to be there. This is a matter of fundamental significance, as it strikes at the center of any person's sense of well-being. A place of privilege should be identifiable, be locally distinctive and provide ample support for everyday life.

Characteristically the people who first inhabit a place, and those who follow them who have wealth or power, settle in the places of natural distinction and advantage — places where the air is fresh or where there is inspiring prospect. Those of us who come later, or for whom the choices are more narrow, settle in places that have less natural advantage.

It is in the places of less advantage that urban design must create distinction. These are the places lost in the midst of extensive urban flatlands. They are the leftover districts that grew without special care and still have no loving sponsor. They have little natural advantage, and without design they have no identity, no particular character. Where we are successful as urban designers we must create a sense of privilege where little was present before.

One of our great successes has been the residential street whose trees have grown to make a canopied outdoor room that supports community aspirations, lasts in our memories and fulfills our need to be in a distinct place. Another successful strategy has been to build public institutions whose location and design lend distinction to districts that otherwise would be nondescript; these places build on our tradition of magnificent city halls and public libraries.



Above: Plaza Sant Pere. Photo by R. Escudé, courtesy City of Barcelona.



Left: Plaza in El Pueblo, the oldest section of Los Angeles. Courtesy Todd W. Bressi.

Below: Everyday places, such as tree-lined residential streets, can be places of privilege. Courtesy Robert S. Harris.



Recently we have had few successes as both local governments and private investors have either ignored what is required to build a suitable public realm or relied too heavily on stylized buildings, decorative plantings and contrived monuments that are more referenced to other places than they are to the history, culture and landscape in which they stand. Our extensive private realms fail to support community life, and they provide only the identity of exclusivity and a rather fearful sense of privilege.

Ultimately, our opportunity to create places of privilege everywhere and for everyone depends upon designing projects at every scale, both public and private, that are designed to augment the inherent identity and distinction of their districts and neighborhoods. Such a realization inspired projects throughout Barcelona during the past decade, an example that

is worthy of our attention. These projects and the principles on which they are based have directly influenced planning in many other places in Europe and in the U.S., and have been particularly interesting as similar planning has proceeded in Los Angeles.

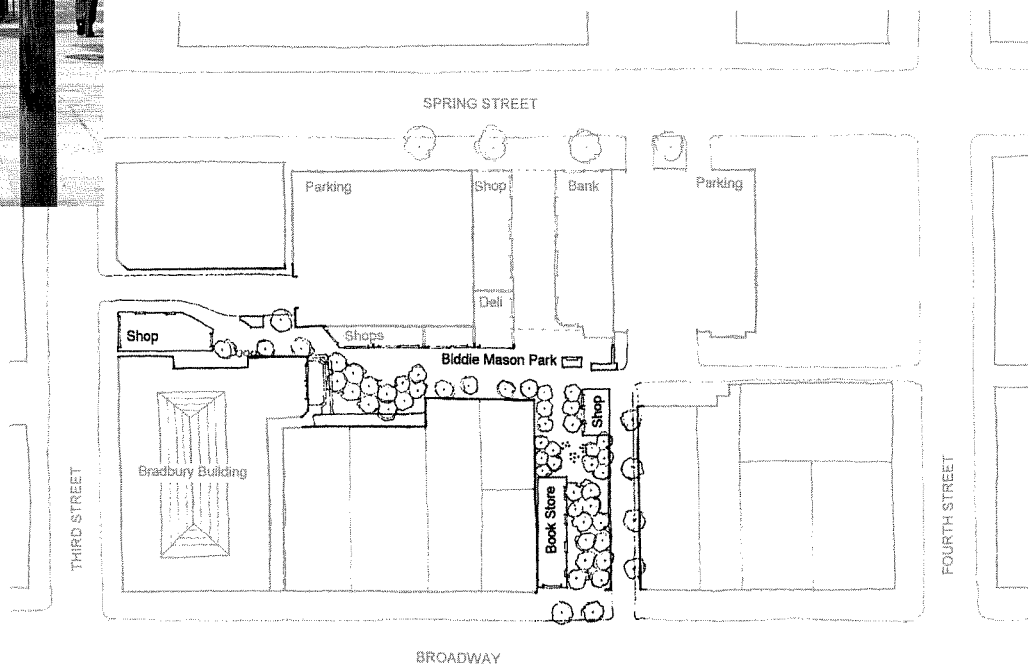
Every Project Counts

Biddy Mason Park in downtown Los Angeles was created a few years ago to link a new parking garage to both the Broadway and Spring Street historic districts. It has given identity and privilege where there was disrepair, and it has tempted all who use it to notice the historic districts, learn about an important aspect of cultural history and sense the possibilities for further development in the area. The best Spanish-language bookstore is now adjacent, one of the state's largest banks has been tempted to return to an underserved district and a new deli has recently opened, furnishing food and drink to be taken outside and enjoyed in this lively paséo.

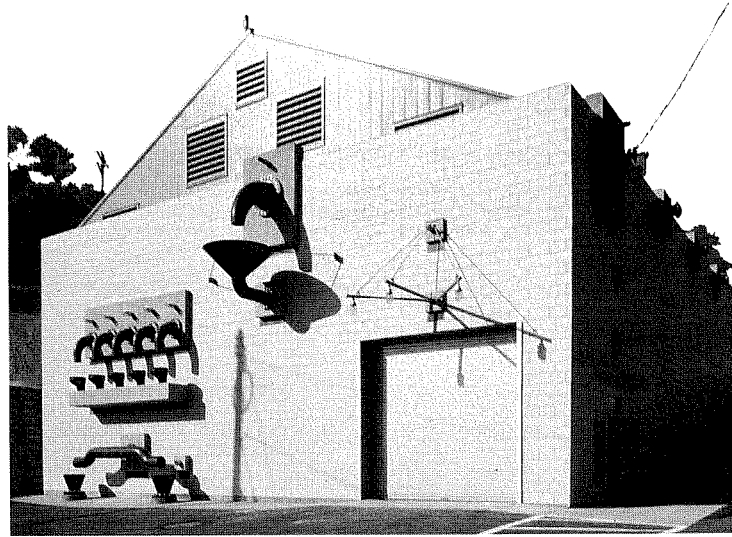
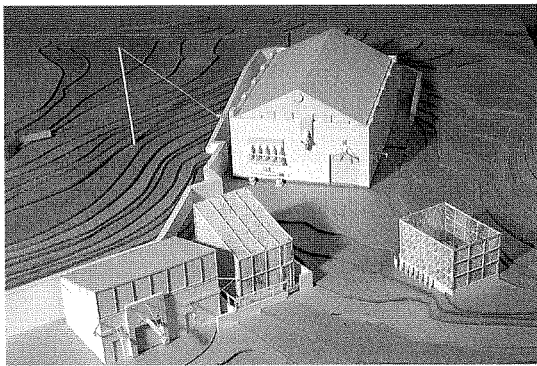
The success of this small place provides an important model. All cities have so many places of no particular distinction that the task of repair and enhancement can often seem overwhelming. Many apparently discouraged citizens, rather than staying where they are and improving their neighborhoods and districts, continue to leave existing environs for newly developed communities. If this exodus is to be stemmed, new civic leadership must inspire a persistent effort towards creating privilege everywhere.



Biddy Mason Park in downtown Los Angeles. Small stores have opened along the park, which winds through the center of a block. Courtesy Robert S. Harris.



Buena Vista Chlorine Treatment Plant, near Elysian Park, Los Angeles, brings identity to the surrounding area. Courtesy Brenda Levin, architect.



This leadership must understand that every public project, especially those as small as Bidley Mason Park, and every privately sponsored project that requires any public approval or support, must not only serve its own internal purposes but also help repair and enhance its immediate environs. Project by project, year after year after year, this systematic attention will create identity and pride. As neighborhoods and districts become places where one would want to be, they will enjoy new prosperity.

The power of such incremental steps towards the reintegration and wholeness of places is a major theme in the work of Christopher Alexander¹ and has been made a central theme in current planning for Downtown Los Angeles. Initiating such a process of development, open to the future yet strategically directed, is a central task and major strategy for the repair and enhancement of existing urban places.

The Annual Work Program

Within every city's annual work program — such as repairing streets, putting up street lighting, building new police stations, libraries, parks or schools — is a powerful set of opportunities for bringing new life, identity and quality to many districts. As

projects of every size and every degree of significance are seen as opportunities for creating special quality, they can become catalysts for stimulating the economic and social well-being of their neighborhoods. Of course, for projects to have such significant effect, to create privilege, requires purposeful and memorable design.

Although cities do take action year-by-year through annual work programs, most projects are highly specific, formed around one primary purpose emanating from single-mission-oriented departments, such as public works or transportation. We have come to realize that even when the projects are sponsored by parks departments, housing authorities or school districts, the work tends to be narrowly defined and goes forward without clear purpose regarding urban form and urban life.

On the other hand, comprehensive city plans can require such unusual resources and cooperation that their implementation is uncertain. Without a powerful sense of common purpose, energy is dissipated through projects that often seem as disruptive as beneficial and planning that promises but doesn't deliver. If projects sponsored by either public agencies or private parties are not to be merely scattered and only self-serving, some civic guidance must be provided.