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Title

Building and Politics [Speaking of Places]

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/20s1n600>

Journal

Places, 8(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1992-10-01

Peer reviewed

Building and Politics

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In *A New Theory of Urban Design*, Christopher Alexander builds upon one central intuition about good city design. “When we look at the most beautiful towns and cities of the past,” he observes, “we are always impressed by a feeling that they are somehow organic.... Each of these towns grew as a whole, under its own laws of wholeness.”¹ Jane Jacobs had come to much the same conclusion when she asked “what kind of problem a city is” in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Her answer was that cities are “problems in organized complexity,” which makes them more like biological problems than anything else.²

Of all the political forms that have come and gone in the history of the world, the only one with a clear and cogent continuity of evolution is the city. However else people have chosen to organize their affairs, they have, throughout recorded history, grouped themselves in villages, towns and cities. Unlike states and nations, cities are an organic response of humans to one another, to the places they find themselves inhabiting and to the challenges and opportunities of living well together in those places.

As a politician, I find hope in the conclusion Alexander draws from his premise about the organic nature of cities. The inherent wholeness of the city can, he argues, only be realized by successive acts of healing, where healing is understood in its root sense of making whole. “Every increment of construction,” he writes, “must be made in such a way as to heal the city.”³ Once we come to see the city as organic, we should apply this rule, not only to construction, but to every civic or political undertaking of any kind. In fact, until building itself is placed in a political context, Alexander’s vision, or any vision of urban design, must fall short of the mark.

In a democratic culture, we cannot achieve good and lasting results in design or any other arena without the active involvement and support of citizens. I believe that our cities (along with all other polities) are in trouble because we have failed to nurture citizenship. And my experience with politics has convinced me that the work of healing the city — of reclaiming its wholeness — is the surest way of nurturing a vital democratic citizenship. It may be no accident that the practice of citizenship has waned at the same time that we have forgotten the ancient and fundamental connection between the citizen and the city. A citizen was originally simply a city-dweller, one who is shaped by and identified with

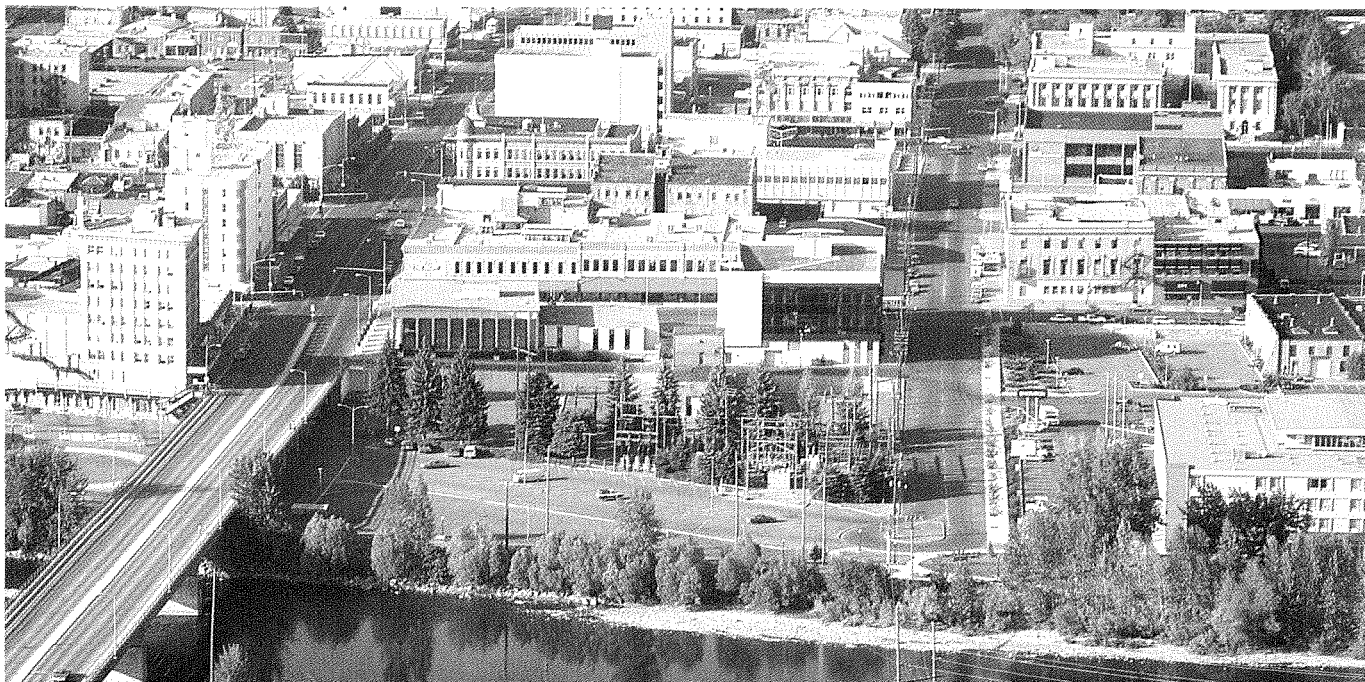
This paper is adapted from a keynote address Mayor Kemmis gave at the spring, 1991, Midwest Regional Mayors Institute on City Design.

Cities are an organic response of people to one another, the places they inhabit and the challenges and opportunities of living together.

Top: © Mark Gorseth.

Center: Photo courtesy City of Missoula.

Bottom: © Mark Gorseth.



the city as a lion is shaped by and takes its identity from the jungle. A citizen is a denizen of the city: a citizen. But the crucial question, then, is how this denizen relates to her surroundings, which in turn depends, of course, on what those surroundings are. There are two main ways in which city-dwellers relate to their surroundings. One is the way of distraction; the other, the way of presence. Only the second can sustain citizenship.

The Presence of Cities

Distraction is the dark hallmark of our age. To an extent that only a poet could have prophesied, we now live, as T.S. Eliot put it, “distracted from distraction by distraction.”⁴ The worst of this syndrome we identify as drug and alcohol abuse, teenage suicide, or astonishing murder rates. But these are only the bellwethers for a growing list of addictions and dysfunctions in our society.

A community is a common or shared unity. It is what we hold together that holds us together. Distraction is the loss of this common unity. The word shares its root with “contract” and with “tractor” and “traction,” all of which have to do with pulling. Distraction pulls us away from what holds us together.

Consider a person who is walking down the street with a headset clamped to his ears. When I meet this person, I try to say, “Hello,” but I cannot because he is not there for me. He is distracted; his attention is pulled away from the street, which we might share, into his private aural world, to which I am not a party. No longer experiencing the street together, we have lost what we might have held in common.

For people to be together, they must be present to one another, at

least in the sense of paying attention to each other. But I cannot be present to you unless I am myself present, unless I inhabit as fully as possible a here and now that you might also inhabit. Without being present in the same place at the same time, we cannot live well together — and, in fact, we do not.

I have become convinced that the chief work of cities is to create and nurture presence. Consider one of the earliest elements of the city: the marketplace. People living off the land could supply most of their needs directly, but some of what they needed, they had to trade for. Chance encounters in the countryside might accomplish some necessary trades, but a prearranged time and place for meeting was far better.

The marketplace, then, performed one preeminent function: It made people and goods present to one another, marking off a here and a now in which vital human needs could be addressed. Neither “here” nor “now” were arbitrary. “Now” was marked by some agreed-upon conjunction of solar and lunar movements, and “here” would be a natural crossing of tradeways or the location that best focused the area of inhabitation of those who sought each other out.

The marketplace grew into a city as a natural extension of people’s need to exchange not only material surplus for deficiency, but also many far less tangible elements of human life. As John Winthrop put it in his “city on the hill” sermon in 1630:

*Wee must delight in each other, make other’s conditions our oune, rejoice together, mourne together, labour and suffer together, allwayes having before our eyes our commission and community in the worke as members of the same body.*⁵

Through all the centuries of their history, cities have continued this role of gathering together and shaping into a more or less coherent whole all the strands of human being. From the earliest marketplace to the modern city, this role has remained deeply dependent upon the creation and nurturing of presence.

The presence of cities, while guided by the lay of the land, is only realized by what we place on the land. A building does not simply occupy a place. All true building creates place and with it, presence. Martin Heidegger has made us aware of this in his elegant essay “Building Dwelling Thinking.” His subject is an ancient bridge on the Neckar, in Heidelberg:

The bridge swings over the stream “with ease and power.” It does not just connect banks that are already here.... With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other’s neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream.

*The location is not already there before the bridge is. Before the bridge stands, there are of course many spots along the stream that can be occupied by something. One of them proves to be a location and does so because of the bridge. Thus the bridge does not first come to a location to stand in it; rather, a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge.*⁶

Heidegger uses the bridge to illustrate the concept of the “gathering of the fourfold.” Earth and sky, divinities and mortals are made present to one another in this gathering; so are joy and grief, work and play, youth and age, past, present and future. Only in this manifold presence does the good life become possible. It is for the sake of this gathering, this focusing, this cradling of a place for the good

life, that cities exist. There are two city activities which are fundamentally dedicated to this end. One is building; the other is politics.

The interplay of building and politics is embodied in the career of Pericles, the Athenian statesman who, during the Peloponnesian Wars, decided to use the treasury of the temple at Delphi to create the immortal buildings of the Acropolis. Although his outraged enemies claimed that he was appropriating what belonged to the gods, Pericles insisted that Athens would become a city that any god would be proud to inhabit.

Those buildings were already 500 years old when Plutarch described the mark of immortality they bore:

*There is a sort of bloom of newness upon those works of his, preserving them from the touch of time, as if they had some perennial spirit and undying vitality mingled in the composition of them.*⁷

This is the kind of building that evokes presence, gathering past and future into a vibrant “now” and at the same time focusing the surrounding landscape into an inescapable “here.” This is how Lewis Mumford describes the Periclean Acropolis in *The City in History*:

*Here, gathered together on the Acropolis, are the true sources of the ancient city, from paleolithic spring and cave to neolithic wall and sacred enclosure, from royal palace and fortress to cosmic temple, from protected camp and village to the proud and powerful city. This combination of natural advantages and man-wrought artifacts does not lend itself to imitation: not everywhere did the image of the city leave such a deep impress on the mind as in Athens.*⁸

Precisely this kind of gathering also marks Pericles’ great political acts, the best remembered of which was his funeral oration following an early bat-

tle of the Peloponnesian War. With a few confident words, Pericles placed his audience securely in time and place. He called upon the memory of those who had laid the foundation of Athens’ greatness and invoked a future that would be a living memorial to that greatness. He described the city itself as one with which his hearers should fall in love, as the soldiers they mourned had done. The Athenian citizen to whom Pericles spoke stood with his feet firmly planted on beloved soil — a citizen fully present. Knowing where (and therefore who) he was, this citizen could meet others in the open stance (even open to correction) which alone can sustain a democracy.

Pericles described what Athens was at that moment capable of becoming and by that act his words (like Heidegger’s bridge), created what they seemed only to mark. Invoking the image of the good city is the first step toward creating the city. This is politics in its rich human form — at once “the art of the possible” and the art of polis-building, the good city creating itself by an act of political (polis-making) will.

Politicians are entrepreneurs of power and when they are at their best, their entrepreneurship is also a stewardship. A politician sees power as a form of capital that is risked on various policies, initiatives, or bids for re-election. There is plenty of room for abuse, but it is also in this very risking, reaping and reinvesting of power that the city explores and on occasion realizes its own potential. Pericles’ bold use of the temple funds was just such a political act: at once risk-taking and polis-building.

The remote splendor of Athens’ golden age should not distract us from the fact that politics is still, in the most humble of settings, this same process of the city striving for its potential,

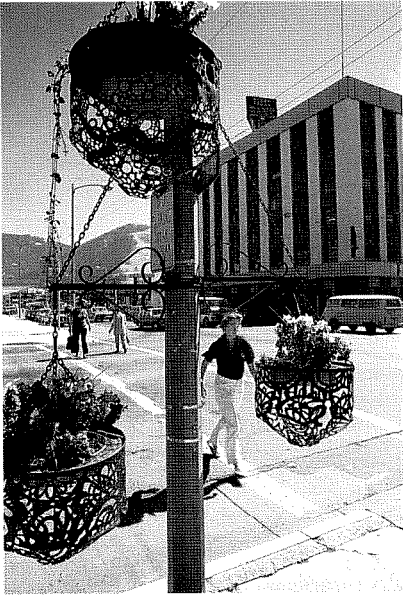
creating whatever presence may lie within its reach. A few examples from Missoula, which even its mayor must acknowledge is no Athens, will illustrate this enduring point.

Strengthening Missoula’s Center

During the 1980s, Missoula brought its downtown business district back from a mall-induced catatonia to a remarkable robustness, the heart of which was the city’s rediscovery of the Clark Fork River. The mechanism for renewal was tax-increment financing. This tool is always open to the same criticism which was leveled at Pericles: that the common treasury is being used for the benefit of one specific area of urban renewal. But Missoula’s leaders were wise enough to insist on the value of reclaiming the city’s center.

As a state legislator, my role at the outset was simply to help pass tax increment legislation, but later, as mayor, I came to appreciate the wisdom and the political entrepreneurship of my predecessors. The political capital they had risked had begun a healing, not only of the physical heart of the city, but of the civic culture as well.

Tax increment funds leveraged private investments in facade improvements and store renovations, and as businesses began returning to the downtown, the public Missoula Redevelopment Agency and the private Missoula Downtown Association fashioned a solid working partnership. The city–merchant alliance spawned a contagion of storefront renewals, replete with tasteful and inviting awnings; the redevelopment agency planted street trees, and the downtown association commissioned a local artist to produce scores of hanging wrought-iron flower baskets.



Missoula's downtown merchants' group commissioned hanging flower baskets from a local artist. Photo courtesy City of Missoula.

The city's Saturday morning farmers' market is held next to the old passenger railroad depot, on a plaza built by the redevelopment agency. Photo by N. A. Lyon.



This was precisely the work of healing the city, and it soon became apparent that the work was beginning to sustain and extend itself. As people met under the flower baskets, they began congratulating themselves on their collective good taste.

Encouraged by what they had accomplished, they tackled the north end of Higgins Avenue, where the demise of passenger rail service had left the entire area around the fine old depot in a state of accelerating decline. Public funds leveraged private investment to bring a microbrewery, pub and restaurant into the depot. The redevelopment agency hired Missoula architect James McDonald, whose firm designed an elegant brick plaza next to the depot. The plaza provided space into which the farmers' market could expand and included a small raised bandstand for the local musicians who would now become a regular feature of the Saturday morning markets.

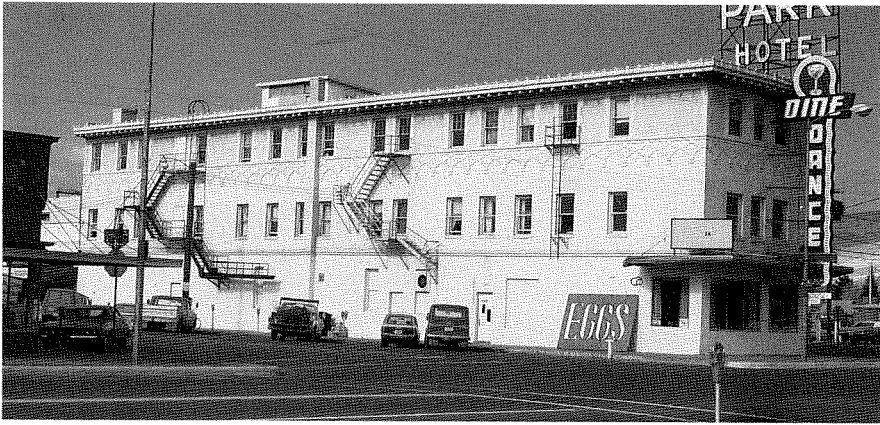
If one were to walk six blocks south from this plaza, past the street trees and flower baskets lining Higgins

Avenue, one would come to the Clark Fork River. Here the work of redevelopment has steadily brought the river back into focus as the center of the city, after decades of being treated as a backyard or refuse dump. We are still expanding the series of new riverfront parks, but the centerpiece will always be the one here at the Higgins Avenue Bridge.

Caras Park is Missoula's one hundred-percent location, not only because of where it is but because of what has been built there. Several years ago, the University of Montana Drama Department and the downtown association erected a vast circus tent as a site for summer theater. Then, following the recommendations from a riverfront design competition, the redevelopment agency began working on a landscaped park, with a bricked piazza which could serve as a tent pad, next to a flat, circular events ring.

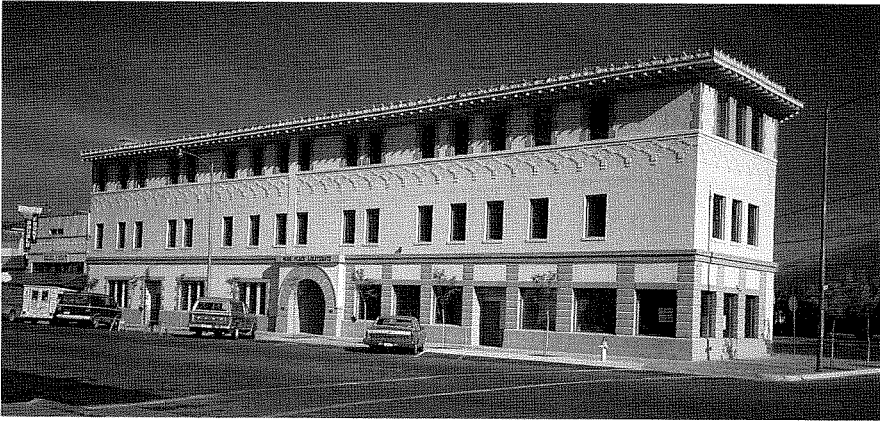
A focal point of this park is an amphitheater nestled into the knoll between the events ring and the river bank. Stan Zimet, a Missoula architect, was hired to take the conceptual plan for the park that had emerged from the design competition and turn it into construction plans. Along the way, Zimet decided to add the amphitheater. "The seating was added in part because the park lacked verticality," Zimet says, "but primarily I suggested it because I thought the events ring was going to be used eventually and if it was, people would need a place to sit."

Once the park was completed, the downtown association began hosting an event it called "Out to Lunch at Caras Park." Every Wednesday at noon throughout the summer, the agency hired musicians to perform in the amphitheater, or in the tent next door on the rare occasion of rain. The first summer, a few faithful officers of



Facade improvements and store renovations, assisted by public tax-increment funding, were an early effort to strengthen Missoula's center.

Photo courtesy City of Missoula.



garage troubled some of my natural allies in the environmental movement. What emerged was a classic blend of politics and design.

The Missoula architects chosen to design the garage were James O'Neill and Stan Zimet. Well aware of the controversy over spending \$3 million to bring more cars downtown, they also recognized the potential of anything like a typical parking garage to brutalize the downtown. "Stan and I were scared to death we were going to be the architects who ruined the downtown," O'Neill told me. He and Zimet decided early that they would not design the project if, like so many parking structures, it had to be what O'Neill calls "brutal — just bones with no skin."

the downtown association brought their sack lunches and huddled on the bottom steps of the amphitheater. The next summer, they brought their friends; then a few food vendors began coming down off the streets for the event; then more people came to see what all these people were doing down in the park. Now, every Wednesday, thousands of people spill onto the hill-sides surrounding the amphitheater. The tent is filled with vendors and the piazza is encircled by them. Most of us would rather forget our own birthdays than miss a Wednesday noon at Caras Park.

Here at Out to Lunch on Wednesday or at Farmers' Market on Saturday morning, the city's ancient work of creating and nurturing presence bears its subtle but indispensable fruit. As I watch the easy, self-confident way in which people greet one another on the steps of the amphitheater, I am reminded of Pericles' description of how Athens had produced a citizenry of "remarkable grace." That grace seems to me, here in this place, to be

some blending of presence and wholeness. But they are not simply the presence and wholeness of self-made individuals. These people occupy and sanctify the presence and wholeness of the city itself and they draw from it the confidence and the competence to continue the work of healing the city. As I have watched Missoula change over the last dozen years or so, I have become convinced that what we build and enjoy together influences how we behave as citizens.

As the downtown came steadily back to life, its renewed vitality created, inevitably, a parking problem. Merchants battled environmentalists as the decision of whether or not to build a downtown parking garage made its way to the city council. Missoula is probably the most environmentally conscious city in the northern Rockies and could not easily accept the idea that the largest single expenditure from its tax increment fund should be devoted to the automobile. These issues arose just as I began my campaign for mayor and my support of the

From their earliest discussions with the director of the redevelopment agency, Geoff Badenoch, they urged the agency to budget separately for the building's facade. "That was one of the smartest things I ever did as an architect," O'Neill concludes. Considering the new building and my constituents' reactions to it, I am convinced that the city's decision to go along with the architects' request was good politics in the most fundamental sense.

O'Neill speaks in terms of a number of "metaphors" designed into the facade. Each of them in a different way has made this building, which could have been an open wound in the city, an act of healing instead. The architects sought, for example, to tie the form of the building historically into a fabric that distinguishes Missoula: the tradition of recognizing corner entries with towers or turrets. So the stair towers were placed in the corners and housed in real towers, glass-encased and elaborated to make pedestrian entrance and exit an engaging, even fun experience.

Caras Park and its amphitheater,
next to the Clark Fork River,
is Missoula's one hundred-per-
cent location.

Photo © Mark Gorseth.



Above all, the architects were determined that this would be one parking garage that would not depress people, but elevate their spirits. The building's playfulness is evident throughout, from its name, "Central Park," as whimsical as the neon graphics in which it appears, to its fanciful dyed-concrete colors, to the child-like building-block triangles, rectangles and squares which comprise the building's entire facade. Even the metal frames in the glassless windows evoke the universal child's rendering of "window" in their earliest drawings of houses and remind us in one more way that this building addresses people even if it houses cars.

One percent of the cost of the building was set aside for public art, as was a traffic island near the main entrance. When the jurying was over, a ten-foot sprawling concrete kitty cat came to guard the parking garage. The calls to the mayor's office began the minute the model was pictured in the newspaper, some calls complimentary, others wondering what we would find to waste money on next.

I have been a politician long enough to know that such disagreements, especially in a lively city like Missoula, will never cease and that emotions surrounding subjects like parks and parking garages and even concrete cats can make or break mayors. But mayors' careers only matter within the careers of their cities and the path a city takes can depend more than we usually recognize on how the city either distracts people or provides them with the possibility of presence.

When the contract with the cat's sculptor came before the City Council for a vote, I held my breath because I knew the "old guard" council members wouldn't have much use for this cat. A

key vote would be cast by Jack Reidy, a crusty, retired Teamster, whose sarcastic Irish wit had often been directed against Missoula's cats, in defense of the birds they sometimes kill. I feared that for Jack, postmodern art was bad enough, but put it in the form of a cat and we probably had real trouble. When it came Jack's turn to vote, he said, "I thought I might vote against this sculpture, but I've decided this is one cat the birds can get even with. I'll vote yes."

Today, even the most devoted car-haters like the parking garage and will sometimes select their path through the downtown to catch a glimpse of it or its cat. It makes people smile and relax; I believe it also makes them better citizens. If Jim O'Neill wanted the parking garage to be playful, he seems to have succeeded. His success as a builder has made the city work a little better than it did before. ●

Missoula solved its downtown parking problem with this carefully designed garage.

Photo courtesy City of Missoula.



Notes

1. Christopher Alexander, *et al.*, *A New Theory of Urban Design* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 2.
2. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 432.
3. Alexander, 22.
4. T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," in *The Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943), 17.
5. John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," written on board the *Arbella* on the Atlantic Ocean in 1630, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 27 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1838), 47.
6. Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 152-154.
7. Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (New York: Modern Library), 193.
8. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 161.