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A Renewed Federal Mandate

The federal government's impact on the landscape has been vast and pervasive. From the earliest days of the republic, federal investment has spurred the growth of communities and regions, and it has transmitted ideas about what the face of architecture, the form of communities and the character of places ought to be.

The location of facilities like customs houses, court-houses, military bases and highways can make or break a town—conferring political status and prosperity on the lucky recipients. But such investments can also be uneasy impositions—their design unresponsive to local traditions or conditions, their long-term prospects dependent on the patronage of far-away politicians and bureaucrats.

The General Services Administration, which manages the government's enormous real estate operation, is often the focal point for this tension. GSA's Public Buildings Service controls more than 300 million square feet of space in more than 1,600 cities; each year it spends more than \$5 billion for private real estate, maintenance and security services and makes some 3,000 lease and location decisions.

The impact of these activities may be local and, at times, undramatic, but they still can have an important effect on communities. The challenge for GSA has been to consider not only the concerns of the agencies it serves but also these local impacts. As long ago as 1949, Congress required GSA to coordinate federal projects with local plans, and a host of mandates concerning historic preservation, environmental protection and shared use have followed.

Last year GSA established a "Center for Urban Development and Livability," whose focus is helping GSA align its activities more closely with the interests of local communities. Last fall, the center gathered regional GSA administrators, project managers and

urban experts in a workshop that considered the dynamics, potential and process of this renewed federal commitment.

From Lightning Rod to Catalyst

The cause of "livable communities" has become a visible political issue, even meriting mention in President Clinton's State of the Union address. "A wave of civic revitalization is rolling across the country," Keith Laughlin, from the White House Task Force on Livable Communities, told the workshop. "The federal government can play a key role in this process, and is committed to being a dependable partner to communities wrestling with this issue."

Of course, the arena in which GSA operates is complex. There are client agencies and building management issues to consider, as well as federal policies concerning retail leasing, selling property, environmental review and historic preservation. At the workshop, GSA staff recounted what one person called "the hundred balls we have to juggle":

- Agency concerns (such as parking and security), may conflict with local concerns (such as urban design, traffic and stimulating development downtown). Agencies often seek extra funding for interior amenities, such as furnishings, rather than public amenities, such as plazas, landscaping or public art.
- Government procedures do not always consider the value of addressing broader community concerns.
- Government spending occurs in a political arena, with many layers of oversight, and is unpredictable.



Opposite page: Market and public art on the plaza at the federal building in Chicago—two approaches to making livable places

Above: The historic Stegmaier Brewery in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., was saved from demolition when GSA converted it into a federal office building.

Photos: Center for Urban Development and Livability

GSA project managers are thus in the position of creating opportunities, cultivating constituencies and crafting deals. Some of the workshop discussions, therefore, focused on good old-fashioned facilitation and negotiating techniques.

But the workshop also considered broader strategies that the center could initiate to help local GSA offices promote community livability. The strategies will necessarily be flexible and situational, responding to project demands and local context. Clearly, however, the center's fundamental role will be to think beyond GSA's basic mission—providing good working conditions for federal workers and good value for public expenditures—to consider how federal investment can most effectively strengthen local communities.

Be a resource. The center can help regional staff and localities simply be being a conduit for information, and by developing new information that supports their work. For example, the center has already teamed with the National Main Street Center to develop a model for assessing the economic impacts federal buildings and workers have in communities.

Be a good neighbor. GSA's "good neighbor" policy seeks to increase the public use of federal buildings and spaces. In San Francisco, that thinking is being applied to the interior organization of a new federal building, according to GSA Regional Administrator Kenn Kojima. "We are trying to combine the idea of livable communities with hassle-free government by using the first few floors as a place where citizens can connect with the government," he said. A post office, passport agency and tax information center will be located there.

Commit client agencies to community goals. "We have to have our client committed to the community, and we don't," said George McGrady, a center field officer based in Atlanta. "We can dance all day long, and at the end they say, 'We're going to the suburbs.' In five years, we have a vacant building."

Sometimes this simply means supporting established community initiatives. In Birmingham, Ala., GSA and the Social Security Administration (SSA) agreed with the local business improvement district to use an SSA parking lot to support after-hours events at the nearby Birmingham Civic Center.

Or it means directing GSA resources to address local problems. In Wilkes-Barre, Pa., an abandoned, historic brewery building was re-opened as federal offices in February, 1998. The brick Victorian Revival building, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, provides space for the SSA, the postal service, a local congressman, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and other federal organizations.

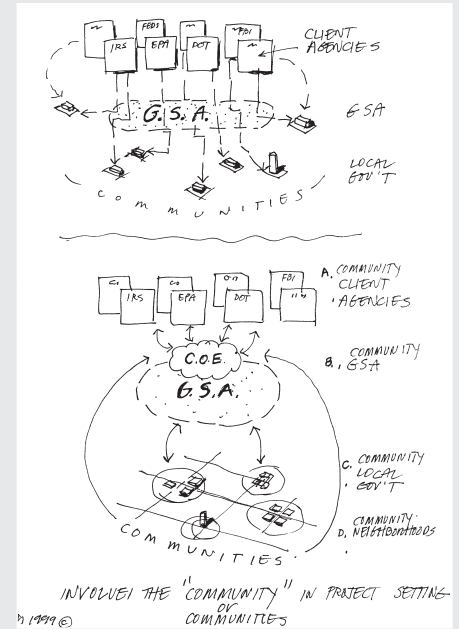
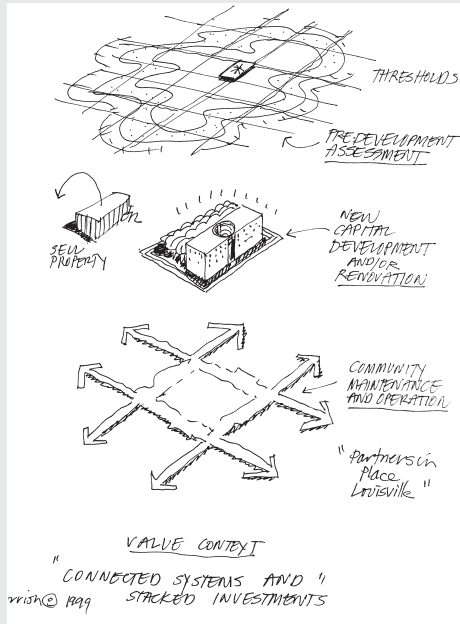
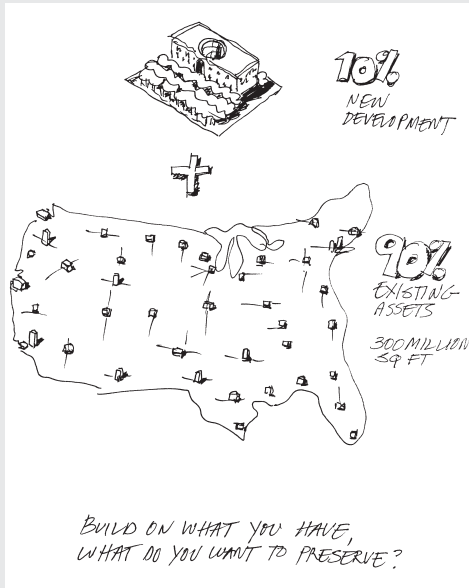
Point out linkages to other federal resources. While agencies like GSA, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Transportation spend billions in urban areas, lower-profile agencies like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration also offer resources. "Federal agencies are all operating with their own missions and own constituencies. Nobody is pulling it all together in one place," said Fred Kent, president of Project for Public Spaces.

Be a partner. The center should be involved in local planning efforts continually, not just when a project comes along. "GSA should be a part of the planning process, not just internalize public opinion into its projects," suggested Elizabeth Jackson, president of the International Downtown Association.

Since new construction comprises only ten percent of GSA's activity, the agency should not overlook its existing properties. "Look at where you are, how people use facilities, why you want to stay," said William Morrish, director of the Design Center for the American Urban Landscape at the University of Minnesota.

That's the idea behind a major initiative in Fort Worth. There, center staff are meeting with GSA and city officials to devise strategies for a civic square that will connect a federal building to development along a transit corridor. One idea involves integrating renovations to the building with development along the main business street. Others include restoring a public fountain in the adjacent federal plaza and redesigning the streetscape and lighting around the building.

Be a convenor. The center should develop the capacity to do focused planning for areas affected by federal investment, urban designer Charles Zucker suggested. That could be especially important to communities that are concerned about livability but have few planning resources, Morrish added.



In Denver, where the center has launched another major initiative, GSA is expanding its federal center next to a transit line, and HUD is supporting a HOPE IV project nearby. GSA could be a convener of federal agencies, "but that's not good enough, city council member Susan Barnes-Gelt said. "Even at the local level, HOPE IV people aren't talking to the BID people, transit isn't talking to anybody."

The center hosted a community workshop designed to map out a strategy for a new downtown district that will link federal and local development efforts to a planned transit corridor. Also, GSA and the local transit agency have collaborated on a plan for location of transit stops in the special district.

Be a catalyst. The center should encourage both its clients and localities to pursue programs that will support livability. "Ask the city to support things you want, such as bringing in housing so workers can feel safe after hours. That is what a private developer would do," said Shelley Poticha, executive director of the Congress for the New Urbanism. In Newark, for example, GSA proposed leasing a city street on which it is establishing a pedestrian mall with a farmers' market.

That includes challenging government notions about buildings. "The way GSA thinks of buildings, as meeting needs of user, is unlike that of developers, who think of the value of their structure. Sometimes you need to tell the clients that the plaza what will create long-term

value, not the oak in the judges' chambers," said Dena Belzer, principal of Strategic Economics.

She also urged GSA to take risks to leverage private development. "Developers are looking for ways to manage risk. GSA seems even more risk-averse, even though its money is at less risk than developers'."

From Within and Without

The center, still in its first year of operation, is busy with major projects in Denver and Fort Worth and dozens of smaller initiatives elsewhere. For now, its role is that of a convener, collaborator and facilitator, and there should be no underestimating the role it can play as a change agent in that capacity.

Over time, though, as the center gains experience, it will think more about challenging how the federal government does business. This will certainly involve reforming laws and administrative procedures that govern federal real estate operations, but it might also involve fundamental new approaches to federal involvement in local places.

What is not likely to change, however, is the fundamental tension between the federal and the local. One hopes that in adjusting to local conditions, federal projects do not abandon the broader sense of purpose that characterize so many of the federal government's most successful architectural, urban design and engineering endeavors.

Diagrams illustrating the role GSA plays in local communities

Left: The properties GSA already owns and leases play a major role in hundreds of cities

Center: Looking at GSA construction, renovation and property disposition activities within a range of larger contexts

Right: Top-down versus collaborative approaches to planning federal investments

Graphics: William Morrish