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Caring for Places: Change

Change is, of course, the very stuff of life; without it we would not be who we are; we would not be where we are.

Perhaps because it is so pervasive and fundamental, change provokes many forms of anxious attention...from the left and the right, from individuals and groups, from governments and corporations, from those eager to capitalize on new opportunities, and from those who think it likely to tear away moorings that are essential in their lives.

Change is puzzling; change is invigorating, change is called for, change is threatening.

It is not change that is at issue, it is the management of change. Words like “vision” and “conservation,” “practical” and “modulated” come to bear; metaphors like “engines of change” and “maelstrom of change” call forth the purposeful and the chaotic, but share the sense of driving force, just as “stability” projects a steady influence—a resistance to transformation, a ready ability to hold one’s bearings.

Getting straight about change in our environments is one of the challenges of our time. In forty years we have seen an increase of 100 million people in the United States alone; more than half again the population that many of us were born into. In another forty years, the predictions now run, our population will have increased another 100 million...far less, of course, than the growth of other segments of the world. And the transformations in our media of communication have in themselves been transformative, as discussed in our last issue.

Change is not in question; it’s all too clear that the present “world order” is neither stable nor tolerable. The question is whether we can maintain a viable sense of what it means to be human and to care about what that means for others...and whether we can gather the will to manage changes that will improve rather than destroy the understandings that presently hold societies together.

Changes in place are often the most startling; buildings are torn down, buildings appear, whole areas of cities or landscapes are wasted in neglect while others are transformed by “the market.” Change that makes a real difference in how we construct our world—projections for the public realm, and the mindful encounters between peoples and place it makes possible, need to be imagined, debated, and given constructive form at various scales, from infrastructure to individual habitat.

Change we must. Not with disregard for the existing, but with care and respect for the lives of others, with cautious regard for conserving what’s been gained and a long-term understanding of resources and their futures..., and, yes, with boldness when necessary; with will and persuasion and persistence equal to the task of unseating conventional wisdom and bringing new insights to bear.

The 2006 EDRA/*Places* Awards program highlights examples of the quiet, deliberate consideration that brings effective transformations into place: research, planning, and thoughtfully implemented designs that reckon their consequences in lives and the places that surround them.

—*Donlyn Lyndon*