

Theme Panels

Thursday's Theme Panel Covers Big Issues for Cities and Suburbs

Wrapping up the first day's theme panel at the AIA convention in Denver, 1999 AIA President Michael Stanton answered no to the session's title question, "American Cities and Suburbs: Big Trouble Ahead?" There are big issues ahead, not big troubles, said Stanton, who moderated the hour-and-a-half session.

Panelists included Dominique Acevedo, a development director with the Northeast Denver Housing Center; Denver Council Member Susan Barnes-Gelt; and AIA Board Public Director and former Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson.

Stanton set the tone for the panel by broadening the perspective. The U.S. is unique in the world by having such an enormous diversity of city sizes, types, and densities, he said. Each category of city presents its own set of challenges and opportunities. Because the discussion was about the relationship between city and suburb, he focussed on the similarities of cities that came into prominence before the automobile age and those that came after.

Design in Denver

Acevedo described an affordable-housing competition for Denver's oldest suburb sponsored in part by the AIA Young Architects PIA. A neighborhood that first came to be in the 1860s with the advent of a commuter rail, Five Points has gone through several cycles of population migration. The latest has left the area underpopulated. Now, with a light rail connection promising to bring life back to the neighborhood, the Northeast Denver Housing Center is faced with the possibility of widespread increases in housing

prices that could again cause a wrenching turnover of population. The solution they are working toward now is to develop 550 units of mixed-income housing. Turning an aging suburb around means creating housing for all income levels, she said.

Denver's gift and its challenge is that people love it for the mountains, Barnes-

residential and commercial cores connected by regional transit systems. A barrier is that the public is ahead of politicians on this idea. People want regionalism, she said. Politicians too often tend to want parochialism. When we talk of smart growth, she concluded, the D word isn't density, it's design.



Shown left to right are Susan Barnes-Gelt, Dominique Acevedo, Michael Stanton, FAIA, and Jerry Abramson.

Abramson to architects: Get involved!

Abramson charged up the audience with a list of trends. One that is developing in Louisville is a recent referendum to merge the city and county governments, bringing the city and suburbs together under one council. Suburbs have long resisted this connection, he said. But certain trends show that the attention of once-complacent suburbanites' is moving back to

the core cities:

- Development-savvy suburban dwellers are fighting to keep undeveloped land that way. Conservation trusts are buying land and governments are buying easements against development of farmlands, all to keep the domino effect of rural land falling to poorly planned development.
- Old suburbs face the same problems of decline as the cities they surround, with development moving outward. But people are tired of long commutes and high gas prices. Transportation is becoming a huge issue. People are moving back in or expanding transit systems.
- Education is a major issue because poor schools mean lost taxpayers.
- Design matters to the public at large.
- New urbanism works because it cre-

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- ates interaction with neighbors.
- Environmental issues are important to the public at large.
- Recreation spaces, with well-designed amenities and facilities are increasingly popular.
- Out-of-home care is another major need, an audience member pointed out.

All this is creating opportunity for architects, Abramson said. The way for architects to get meaningfully involved is to get civically involved. When politicians face a tough, nitty-gritty problem, they round up the usual suspects to help them out of it, he said. Architects aren't the first that come to mind. And they should be. Become players and get perceived as problem solvers, Abramson exhorted to the packed and, their applause implied, appreciative audience. ■