

One New York State: Urban Policy and Regional Design

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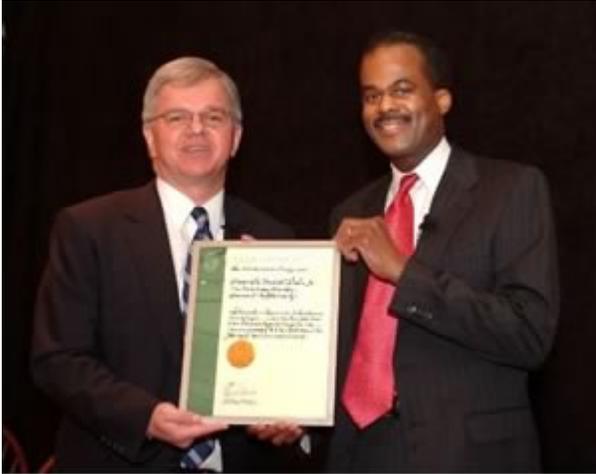
Many American cities have deteriorated over the past 40 years as people have abandoned urban areas for the suburbs, following the dominant value system in our culture that holds "a house in the suburbs is better." More recently, the historic preservation movement, among other influences, has rekindled interest in older structures and urban living. The perception that center-city areas are for the less affluent began to disappear when young urban professionals (the so-called "yuppies") began their return to major cities.



This dichotomy raises a question for all of us: How should we allocate resources today—for urban renewal, suburban initiatives, or both? A symposium hosted by AIA New York State (AIANYS) on April 5 to celebrate the chapter's 75th anniversary set out to address this and related issues. Entitled "One New York State: Urban Policy and Regional Design," the symposium took on the ambitious goal of unifying the state, while its overall objective was to foster relationships between architects and elected officials statewide to address the scarcity of livable communities and other dominant issues facing New York State's cities.

Universal challenges

Mayors Gerald D. Jennings of Albany, Matthew J. Driscoll of Syracuse, and Philip A. Amicone of Yonkers addressed these at the event, as did Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr. of Suffolk County and Paula Luria Caplan, deputy director of planning and development of Bronx Borough President Carrion's office. Peter A. Baynes, executive director of the New York Conference of Mayors served as moderator, and former Mayor William A. Johnson Jr. of Rochester delivered the keynote address.



The symposium focused on waterfront development, transportation, affordable housing, downtown revitalization, and brownfield redevelopment. Each community has achieved some success in one or two of these areas, and the speakers illustrated their remarks with plans, photographs, and renderings of successful projects. They also explored visions they and others have for their cities, and each enlisted the assistance of the architectural community.

Almost unanimously, each official bemoaned the lack of a consistent policy for New York State's cities. Former Mayor Johnson offered a proposal for a federal policy to assist cities. He noted that President Bush assigned an official to oversee redevelopment of New Orleans, and the federal government is very involved with rebuilding. He suggested that this degree of participation become a matter of policy nationwide instead of an isolated response to a crisis or emergency.

Looking at the laws

New York State's Wicks Law requires publicly funded construction projects to bid as separate contracts. Architects and others have opposed this provision. Construction costs are increased by as much as 30 percent under this procurement method. Elected officials at the symposium pledged to work with architects throughout the state to repeal or reform the law.

The Historic Homes Tax Credit bill now in the New York State Assembly and Senate was next on the agenda. The mayors agreed that passing this provision would be a major boon in revitalizing downtown areas, especially upstate cities, and that architects are effective partners in supporting such provisions. The AIA has supported similar federally funded provisions for several years.

Housing, transportation, education

Assemblyman Thiele spoke about affordable housing and the acute need for "worker housing" on Long Island, where people other than the wealthy often can't afford to live. Tax credits could go a long way to provide affordable housing. Mayor Driscoll agreed

that tax credits would also help revitalize downtown Syracuse. Architects, they say, can be influential advocates for local ordinances that allow additional market-rate units to be built in exchange for affordable units. Syracuse proposes to revise land-use regulations with the help of architects and introduce mixed-use development with residential above retail use to add life to its downtown.

Thiele stressed transportation issues. On Long Island, the "one way in, one way out" system poses a huge problem: Automobile congestion on Long Island is unsurpassed in New York State. Thiele praised the entrepreneurs who created the Hampton Jitney. They marketed the idea of taking a bus so well that "catching the Jitney" has become the way to travel to the Hamptons.



The education system was the next issue. Good schools attract home buyers and, consequently, developers. Mayor Amicone and the City of Yonkers have attracted development despite perceived problems with the school system. The result: many affluent residents send their children to private and parochial schools.



On the waterfronts

We identified common statewide issues. Nearly all communities in our state are faced with obsolete industrial waterfront structures and inadequate public access to the water. Since the 1980s in Manhattan, riverfronts have been incrementally revitalized with esplanades and other public walkways. Plans are in place for Brooklyn Bridge Park. Mayor Amicone has plans for the Yonkers' waterfront, and Borough President Carrion is seeing redevelopment on portions of the Bronx's 75 miles of shoreline. In Suffolk County, however, scenic

waterfronts are on privately owned property, not available to the public. The City of Ithaca is seeking development proposals for its Inlet Island, and Rochester has been redeveloping its waterfront property for public use over the past 10 years. Master plans are in place for several riverfront projects in Albany, and Mayor Driscoll spoke of a major retail project planned for the Syracuse waterfront. Mayor Jennings summarized that residential, retail, and riverfront revitalizations constitute the most important initiatives for cities in New York State.

Can we do it?

Can New York architects work as One State to address common issues? What is the architect's role in working with elected officials? Architects acknowledged their potential leadership role in breakout sessions. They concluded recommendations for action:

- Advocating for comprehensive master plans
- Becoming accessible to political leadership
- Leading the public to create livable, sustainable communities
- Being advocates for important community issues
- Recognizing that schools define a community
- Forming community design centers
- Joining community planning boards.

It's clear that design is not the answer with many of these issues. The solutions go much deeper, and architects need to use their abilities as consensus builders and synthesizers of information from varying sources.

The symposium started a rapport between the elected officials and the architects of New York State. The benefits of collaboration between government and architecture should be far-reaching as the AIA national organization celebrates its 150th anniversary in 2007.