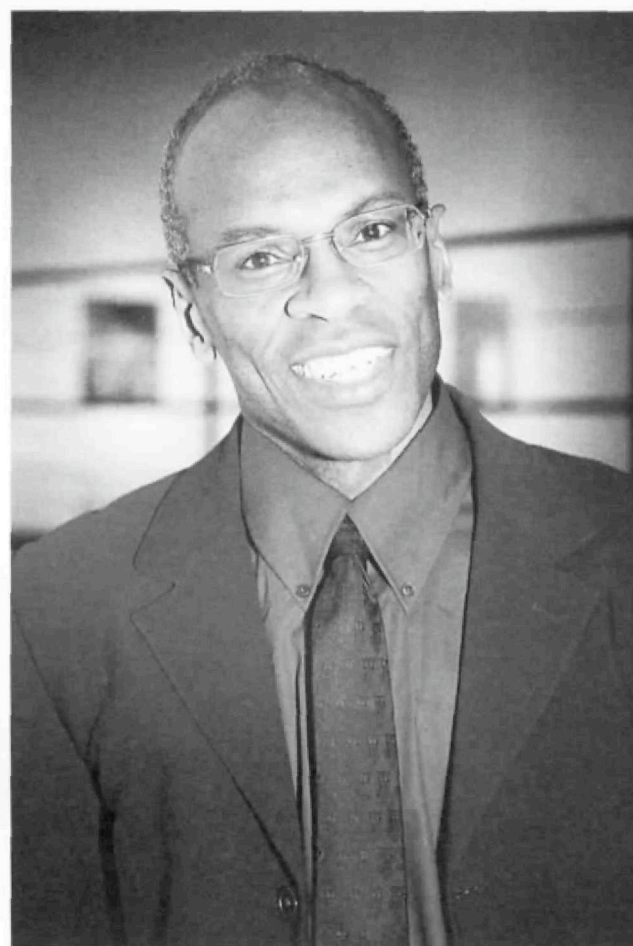


Mayor League's lecturers, from left to right: Joseph P. Riley, mayor of Charleston, South Carolina; Maurice Cox, formerly mayor of Charlottesville, Virginia; John Norquist, formerly mayor of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Bill White, mayor of Houston; and Mark Robbins, dean of the School of Architecture at Syracuse University.



Photos by Gael Cunningham Williams



BY SUSAN ROGERS

Politics and Design

"HOUSTON," NOTED MAYOR Bill White at a recent lecture, "is a city redefined from generation to generation." That is unquestionably true. In fact, perhaps the only truly permanent thing about American cities in general is change. Over the last decade population growth, immigration, rapid urban and suburban development, and shifting demographics have substantially transformed the built environment of our cities, as well as our political and social landscapes. This is as true in Houston as it is throughout the world. For the first time in history more than half the world's population resides in cities, and this concentration is expected to grow. So while the 20th century was defined as a period of rapid industrialization, the 21st century will be the age of the city. The quality of our urban environments will increasingly define the quality of our lives, and perhaps even of our civilization. Our future will be lived in cities.

It was with this as background that in January and February the Rice Design Alliance sponsored a series of lectures whose topic was the city. Titled "Mayor League: Reconsidering the City," the series brought five speakers with a deep connection to urban issues

to share their knowledge and experience. The lecturers were Joseph P. Riley, mayor of Charleston, South Carolina, and co-founder of the Mayors' Institute for City Design; Bill White, mayor of Houston; Maurice Cox, formerly mayor of Charlottesville, Virginia, and currently professor of architecture at the University of Virginia; John Norquist, formerly mayor of Milwaukee and currently president of the Congress for New Urbanism; and Mark Robbins, formerly National Endowment for the Arts design director and currently dean of the School of Architecture at Syracuse University.

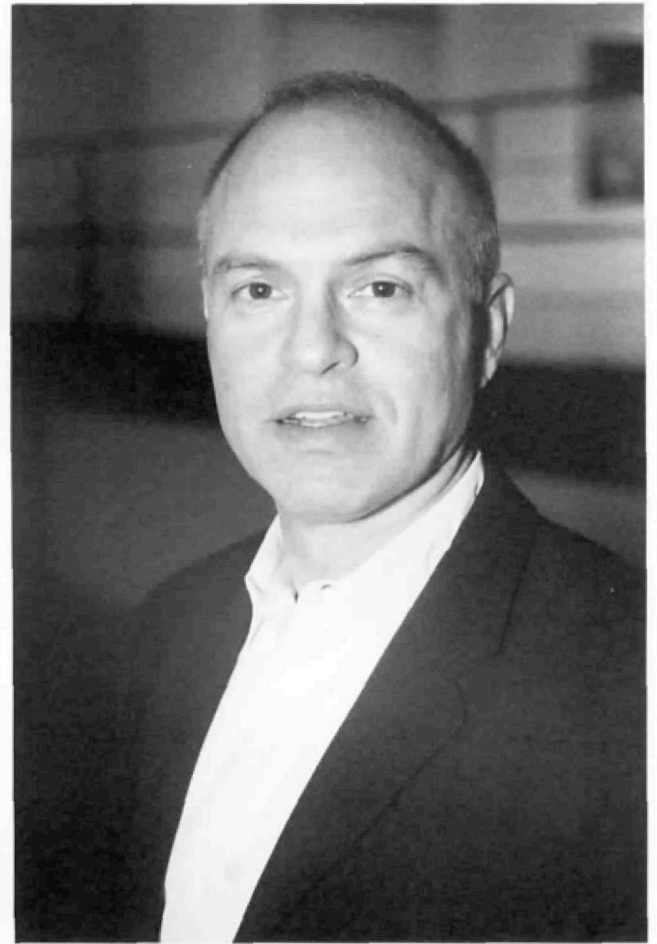
The current and former mayors, leaders, and designers explored the forces shaping the 21st-century city and provided their audiences a glimpse into their perspective on the vision, processes, and politics of city change. Uniting the lectures was a concentration on quality of life and the necessity to merge design and politics for the overall good of cities and their citizenry. Through their talks the speakers demonstrated that mayors are often the stewards of their cities, and designers often their visionaries, but the public is the beneficiary of good decisions and good design. The talks illustrated

the need for strong leaders, vision, and a commitment to the messy process of struggling toward consensus in a diverse society. Correspondingly, the lecturers discussed the city as both an artifact and as a setting for democracy, as a stage for our public as well as our private lives, and as a place that grows wealth but also inequity. Design, economics, policy, and participation were all addressed as playing essential roles in shaping, both positively and negatively, the public realm and our built environment at large.

In considering the city as an artifact, the speakers pointed out that design is clearly one strategy for change. Unquestionably, design strategies have been applied to the "problem" of the city over the course of history. Baron Haussman's Parisian Boulevards, Daniel Burnham and the City Beautiful Movement, Ebenezer Howard's Garden City Movement, and the universal design proposals of the modernists led by Le Corbusier are all examples of this approach. These utopian ideals held in common the position that design had the power to change our perception of the city and the quality of our cultural and civic life, and that through beauty

the city and the life of its residents could be improved. Historically, the focus on physical space had positive and negative impacts, as John Norquist pointed out. On the one hand it led to the development of park systems, garden cities, and tree-lined streets, elements of the urban environment that today many appreciate. On the other hand it led to massive freeways, displacement, sprawl, and a disinvestment in the public realm.

In recent years utopian thinking has returned, largely through the practices of the New Urbanists. Designers, planners, and politicians are increasingly focused on a city's physical form. As was the case with utopian thinking in the 19th and 20th centuries, these efforts have generated substantial improvements, including enhancing the quality of pedestrian environments, improving the quality and density of urban housing, and generating renewed interest in both a strong public realm and the city itself. But the question of whether design and beauty can be singularly defined, or universally applied as a strategy to improve not only the physical condition of our cities but also our social lives, has not been answered. Over the last 100 years, design-focused approaches



The lecture series "Mayor League" explores the forces shaping the 21st-century city

have most often been used to enhance areas of a city for the benefit of the middle and upper classes, inadvertently or intentionally leading to displacement of the poor.

In his talk, Charleston Mayor Joseph Riley argued instead that design should be employed to ensure that all citizens and all places in a city were loved and beautiful, commenting that "everything built should add to the beauty of the city." Former NEA Design Director Mark Robbins was more skeptical, stating that "vibrancy is not determined by décor, but by how people can occupy space and use it freely without regulations." The "Mayor League" talks failed to answer whether a healthy city is built on good design alone, though it was clear that design can add value and uncover opportunities. And as both John Norquist and Maurice Cox pointed out, design can also envision alternative futures. The consensus seemed to be that the American city is truly too complex for simple solutions, though design certainly makes a difference.

Design is shaped and heavily influenced by two factors, economics and policy. This fact was emphasized by the

lecturers who focused on the need to look beyond design to the messier question of how design is financed and regulated. They underscored the idea that design strategies cannot be discussed in a vacuum, and that in particular design strategies cannot be discussed without considering the questions of marketability and the policies that regulate design.

Few would argue that economics is the lifeblood of design, the engine of private and public enterprise that takes its cue from the market, but also takes design from imagination to realization. In the "Mayor League" talks the market was described both as a generator of change and as a system that cannot be depended on in the planning of our cities—conflicting and contradictory positions. Former Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist suggested that good urbanism itself has a high market value, and given the going rate of a downtown loft in Houston, this belief is hard to deny. But dependence on the market alone can create problems. As Mark Robbins pointed out, "The highest and best use [of a property] is not always the most profitable. It might be a park." Joseph Riley concurred, suggesting that if we depend on the market alone to plan

our cities we might be sacrificing both diversity and the "democratic zones where people practice their citizenship."

Riley went on to advocate for intervening in the market, and in fact in the process of development itself, as a means to ensure high quality development that benefited all of a city's residents, whether a project was for affordable housing, public space, or private office development. Historically, Houston has largely placed its fate in the hands of the market. But the city's leaders are currently testing Robbins' and Riley's advice with the development of the new downtown park fronting the George R. Brown Convention Center, a park that will substantially enhance the public realm, and with a commitment to public transit, which will profoundly shape development. Both of these public initiatives add economic value to Houston and promise to be catalysts for new private development. But they also require major public investment, both financially and politically.

Such an investment in the future of America's cities can also be accomplished through enlightened policy. Policy shapes design. Policy shapes the quality of streets, blocks, communities, and ultimately cit-

ies themselves. Developing clear priorities for policy initiatives and understanding the implications of these initiatives is an important strategy for improving cities. Following the lead of the late urban thinker Jane Jacobs, John Norquist pointed out that you have to encourage "complexity of urban form." It is then, he said, that "you end up with a city." This type of complexity was largely eliminated by post-World War II American urban policy, which was influenced by the visions of Le Corbusier and Ebenezer Howard, both of whom advocated a strict separation of uses rather than a vibrant mix, a separation between the pedestrian and the automobile and people and their workplaces. After more than 50 years we are beginning to recognize that this compartmentalized approach to city design has birthed streets designed solely for cars and trucks, sprawling landscapes with often unbearable commutes, setbacks that destroyed pedestrian environments, and parking requirements that eliminated the possibility of small-scale urban infill projects and left gaping holes in the urban fabric.

While it may be tempting to replace one set of policy standards with another, several of the "Mayor League" speakers



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Houston, with its emerging light rail system (top) and increased activity in its urban core (top and above, outside Jones Hall) is facing many of the issues addressed by the "Mayor League" lecturers, among them, how do you balance the push for growth with the need for more public spaces and protection of the environment?

suggested that it might be better to instead work towards developing flexible policies that relate to a number of different contexts, and are guided by a shared vision created by residents and stakeholders. Flexible policy has the potential to meet the needs of citizens and enhance the quality of all our spaces, from historic districts to edge cities, strip shopping malls to dense urban mixed-use districts, and suburban enclaves to downtown neighborhoods. Each of these landscapes requires a different approach. As Mark Robbins pointed out, policy could benefit from innovative creative processes used in the design professions and enlightened and participatory politics. We live in the 21st century, Robbins noted, and "we drive cars, we have drive-ins and parking garages. We need new strategies for the city... Design and policy should be combined."

As design is the vision behind city change, policy the regulator of that design, and economics the controller, politics is the formidable force behind making the vision a reality. The political process is where the design professions—architecture, planning, and development—meet city officials, where the public meets its leaders, and where the values of both use

and the market need to be reconciled. It is the platform for debate that serves to protect the public realm and help ensure that all participants are heard. The political process of city design requires, as former Mayor of Charlottesville Maurice Cox noted, that we all be "public citizens" and engage in debate and compromise. In fact, Cox stated that the only reliable method for turning a vision into a reality was participation. The other "Mayor League" presenters agreed that when you add participation and consensus to a vision for the future, it develops brawn.

"Our cities," Robbins said, "must respond to our complex cultures." This requires that everyone participate in the process and lend their time and opinion to the question of how to create a vision of the city—or, alternatively, multiple visions—that respect, nurture, and build on strengths such as diversity and openness, even while addressing problems such as a lack of equity and an unloved and uncared for public realm. He went on to caution that mayors cannot look for the quick fix, "a stadium, an arena, or a building by Frank Gehry." They must instead search for participatory strategies and plans that build on the uniqueness

of their individual places, and strengthen their existing assets.

This is Houston's dilemma. Houston's challenges, as Mayor Bill White pointed out, include a lack of planning as well as dealing with issues of quality of life, public transit, the need for more public spaces, protection of the environment, and equity. These are big issues, issues that can be framed across the entire city and across the full breadth of the agencies, institutions, professions, and organizations that concern themselves with the city. How these issues are defined, connected, and addressed could significantly impact Houston's future.

The question is, will Houston lead or will it follow? Will the shapers of the city take their cues from a formulaic approach to city design, or will we develop new forms and strategies that build on an "open city of opportunity," as Mayor White suggested at "Mayor League." Perhaps the lecture series will have a lasting impact on the relationship between designers, civic leaders, and the larger public in Houston—and ultimately on the role of design, as both a process and a product, in making Houston a shining example of the 21st-century city. ■