

Build Bold, Build Beautiful, Build Business

Design is the nexus of the Infrastructure and Beauty Necessary to Build Community and remake our Economy

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Today's incessant talk about infrastructure spending--and the action it foreshadows--is a bright ray of hope illuminating this dark economic passage we are going through. We must seize this rare opportunity to energize our economy by building public works that are durable and enduring, and whose utility and beauty build community and enable a greater future. Los Angeles, a region brimming with deep design talent and huge infrastructural needs, is poised to lead the nation in this regard...if it so chooses.

Choosing to fund and build infrastructure is a hallmark of a good, caring, and fine society. Why? Because its fruits are often born years, and even generations, later. While we ourselves hope to enjoy the benefits of these endeavors, it is really for our children and their children that we do it. In the 1980's, the citizen's of Los Angeles voted to build a mass transit system. This system, for all that has been done to date, will begin to feel robust in about 15 years....40 years after it began.

The green epoch we have entered is grounded in the idea of the active stewardship of sustainable infrastructure. But here is *the conundrum of infrastructure*: when it performs well, it is virtually invisible to the body politic: exquisite water flows easily from the tap. Lights go on. It rains with no flooding. The subway works. Public universities mill architects, engineers, doctors, scientists, and teachers year after year. Cargo surges through ports. No one ever fills a glass with clean water, and exults, "See! Government spending works! And every time, no less!"

EVERY project takes time and has problems. This is called "life". In a real sense, every project is fundamentally a problem-solving exercise. Indeed, public perception of infrastructure spending is invariably negative because over the course of its construction, the normal problems (which make for fantastic daily news and reality TV) of any project are what the public sees. Inevitably, the realization of the vision is in the unimaginable future. The payoff, that is, the completed project, is off in the distant future. And if it has no "above ground", seen component, the payoff is rarely ever consciously felt. In other words, the palpable, emotional, qualitative improvement of life that touches people's souls and makes them care about their communities--is often unseen. This is a challenge for all infrastructural projects. *For most normal people, if you don't see it, it doesn't exist. This is where the design disciplines earn their central place at the table of infrastructural improvement.*

Architecture and landscape architecture are that nexus of infrastructure and community that make people love their cities, care for them, and make them better. Good (and bad) communities are self-fulfilling prophecies. If you think your neighborhood is special,

you treat it so, and it becomes more special. The opposite is true as well. If you think your neighborhood is unloved and not special, a downward spiral of neglect and degradation ensues.

Building Public Support

It is an all too typical, sad LA story. So often in the Post War era, local infrastructure projects focused exclusively on their narrowest function, without regard for the central role that beauty and recreation play in building communities that are loved. To be fair, it was a time where the romance of the car seemingly trumped everything. But opportunities were lost to create the parks, walkways, refuges, or even evocative monumental forms in the construction of many local public works projects.

Forgotten is the lesson of Hoover Dam. Let us remember it.

In the depths of the Great Depression, the great Los Angeles architect Gordon B. Kaufmann (also designer of the Los Angeles Times building) was selected to redesign the drab look of the proposed Hoover Dam, perhaps the quintessential project of public infrastructure in the 20th century. Its value has only grown over time. Kaufmann transformed a bleak monolith into a transcendent Art Deco masterwork replete with sculpted turrets, exciting generations of tourists. Hoover Dam, inscribed in our collective mind, instills immeasurable pride in citizens. It is a timeless monument that speaks deeply of human confidence and triumph. It was born of design and engineering.

A lesson of hope in the LA River.

To shortchange infrastructural spending and ambition is to shortchange ourselves and our children. Let's look at the LA River. The good news was that the Army Corps of Engineers tamed the wild river 70 years ago and stopped the dangerous flooding. But as they did that, they removed the social, recreational, and spiritual lifeblood of the Basin that the River was, and created a scar that runs through the heart of the city. Their ambition was narrow, important, and dangerously limited.

Ironically, the famed landscape architecture firm Olmsted Brothers crafted a plan in 1928 for a chain of parks along the Los Angeles River for the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. But that brilliant document was ignored by the Army Corps of Engineers, which built the modern river, sans amenities. The Los Angeles River became iconic, not of useful flood control, but of how well-intended projects blight the land.

Today and for the next few generations, we are making up for what was lost. A vision of a River that embodies the aspirations of the City and its inhabitants has captured our collective imagination and will be realized. Our souls have been touched. Had that been done 70 years ago, the incremental cost difference between solving the

engineering problem alone and also creating 51 mile stretch of urban beauty and consequence, would have been trivial.

Understandings of the beauty of value and the value of beauty must ground the design of infrastructure to create an economy and communities of desire. Los Angeles is replete with the talent to create public works that triumphantly inspire the culture, and confidently embrace the future. That talent used today will ensure success tomorrow.

Attract Business. Make Beauty

While it is sound policy to invest in infrastructure, it is also good business. Obviously, well-run ports, rails, and roads are necessary for commerce. Beyond that, the post-industrial service economy (the Microsofts, Googles, and other professional services) can choose hometowns based on amenities that attract employees. A major city with a crumbling, banal infrastructure and limited recreational options is less able to attract or retain business. The American experience suggests that once business begins to leave a city, property values start sliding.

There is no choice. We must undertake great infrastructure projects today with vigor and passion. And when we build—be it an Alameda Corridor, or the Metropolitan Transit Authority, or the \$27 Billion LAUSD School Construction program—we must understand the central role of beauty and meaning to create sustainable, compelling, and popular projects. They MUST capture and propel the public imagination...especially if they are to be funded. When the \$2-billion Alameda Corridor was constructed, could it not have become a 20 mile linear park at grade, transforming a huge swath of Los Angeles?

LA, again and again has committed to the future.

The astonishing news is that time and again, the voters of Los Angeles County have approved infrastructure spending, including recent measures to improve schools and mass transit. Indeed, we are a good and fine society.

In return, though, our citizens are entitled to projects which honor their commitment to the future with places of delight and joy, that happily nurture prosperity and community.