

OPINION

Looking for San Diego's public spaces

By LAWRENCE A. HERZOG

More than 2,000 years ago, the ancient Greeks demonstrated how urban design could promote democracy. Every Greek city was anchored by the agora — town square — an outdoor gathering place where strangers developed and experienced a sense of civic tolerance.

This summer, a panel of leading U.S. architects, writers, city planners and developers, under the sponsorship of two national nonprofit organizations, crafted a new urban design award program. "The Search for Great American Public Places" will recognize America's model public places on the basis of their aesthetic qualities and their ability to bring people of different ages and races together into face-to-face contact. In this year's first round, 62 sites around the nation were selected for awards.

The prize winners ranged from Rockefeller Center and the Brooklyn Bridge walkway in New York City to Faneuil Hall Market in Boston, Washington Square in San Francisco and the downtown plaza of Santa Fe, N.M. Not a single public place in San Diego was among the 62 award-winning sites.

While we might attribute San Diego's absence on the award list to the East Coast bias of the panelists (it hardly seems possible that Balboa Park could have been left off the list), this seems a good moment to do some soul searching about public life in San Diego. Why did our city and its public spaces (pedestrian streets, squares, parks), set in a Mediterranean-like ambience, not attract the attention of some of the leading urban designers in the country? And what kind of public life will our city have in the 21st century?

The answer lies partly in the kind of city we are — low-density, suburban, freeway-oriented. The most prolific gathering places of many San Diegans are the atria of shopping malls. We are not inherently pedestrian in our lifestyles. Computers, cellular telephones, cable TV, etc. tempt us off the streets and back into cars, offices or condos.

But most people will tell you their preference is to spend more time in the public domain. That is probably the reason why San Diego, like other American cities, has witnessed the proliferation of outdoor cafes in the last decade. We are "rediscovering the center," as urbanist William Whyte wrote in his clever 1988 book, "City."

But street cafes can only be a beginning. Great public places may be created by designers, but it is people who make them work. Chicano Park, with its vibrant murals and pre-Columbian kiosk, is the nucleus of Barrio Logan, a masterful public place borne through the efforts of community activists. Even Balboa Park was originally created through the hard work of turn-of-the-century San Diegans.

City governments can help, especially with the input of community business and local planning groups. The first step is to make public space a priority in the plan-

ning and environmental review process. We also need a comprehensive master plan for our public areas that addresses the questions raised by the new American Public Places awards — how to make streets and public areas viable as meeting places for people of different backgrounds. A few keys for San Diego ought to be considered:

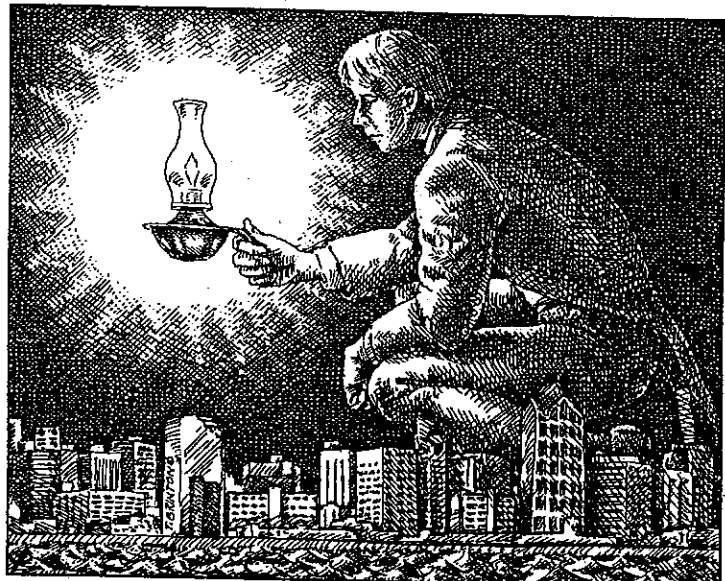
The Mexican connection: Our southern neighbor may be in the midst of a political and economic crisis, but it is also part of one of the greatest urban design cultures on this planet. We can learn a great deal from Mexico about how to design cultures on this planet. We can learn a great deal from Mexico about how to design urban public space. In his book "The City Square," architect Michael Webb wrote that "Nowhere in the world does the plaza flourish more strongly than in

ers: pedestrians, cyclists, skateboarders, roller bladers, joggers.

Shopping malls as downtown — Not! It is far too easy to accept shopping malls as the new downtowns of America. Some malls, like Horton Plaza, are colorful, energetic spaces, but they are still walled-in places of consumption. They are still privately controlled.

But mall owners are determined to keep us coming back. Twenty-movie theater complexes, fitness centers, food markets and other community activities are being relocated into the mall. This may not be a bad thing, as long as we tear down the walls around the mall and connect it to the surrounding community. I'd like to see more people walking or biking to the mall in the next century.

Good streets: Some of the really vibrant,



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Mexico."

In San Diego, a great deal of energy is spent on extending economic and business ties across the border in the age of NAFTA. Why not explore and learn from the way Mexicans design cities? If for example, in hindsight, we could have seen the way Tijuana developed its River Zone, an ecological setting similar to Mission Valley on our side, we might have avoided one of the great errors of San Diego's urban development, and created a valley urban corridor with more of a sense of community.

The waterfront: Obviously, one of our great assets is our waterfront. Downtown San Diego, the beaches and bays all have the potential to be spectacular public places. But we need to think of them as civic spaces and consider ways to make them user friendly. In downtown San Diego, redesign plans for the old police station and the convention center offer an opportunity to make the issue of public gathering space a priority. Along the beaches and bays, we must resolve the emerging conflict between divergent us-

but often forgotten public places in San Diego lie in its old commercial streets: Logan Avenue, San Ysidro Boulevard, Broadway (Chula Vista), University Avenue (Hillcrest), Adams Avenue. Many of these streets have been redeveloping after years of decay. Small-scale commercial tenants couldn't compete with giant retail centers, supermarkets, or, you guessed it, The Mall.

Street fairs, outdoor cafes and community-development efforts have brought these streets back onto the urban scene. Community planning must continue to revitalize the old commercial streets of our neighborhoods so that someday we can say that the Main Street USA we enjoyed over the weekend was the one in our community and not the one in Disneyland.

In his book, "Great Streets," urban planner Allan Jacobs writes, "There is magic to great streets. We are attracted to the best of them not because we have to go there, but because we want to go there. On a great street we are allowed to dream."

Let's give ourselves the spaces to dream here in San Diego.

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