

Chaos, Order and Values

by Alan Littlewood

JANE JACOBS changed the way in which I look at the world around me and in so doing changed the way I think about it. I now accept that chaos, order and values are essential components of built things, architecture and cities. I use the word *chaos* in reference to those things or events that are unpredictable, suggestive or idiosyncratic. On the other hand, *order* is that which is calculable, prescriptive and often exclusive. And by *values* I refer to principles or standards—one's judgement of what is valuable or important in life.

I was recently asked what the main influences behind the design of St. Lawrence, a 1970's Toronto housing development, were. (See *article on page 19*.) The interviewer was anticipating Jane's part in the planning of the new neighbourhood. In reply I recalled a story about Jane's admonition to me regarding the inappropriate use of a word. One day when I was talking to her about my work, I referred to St. Lawrence as a "project". She said, "Don't say project. Say neighbourhood, as in community. The way you think about this will determine what you do."

Two ways of approaching design

The following photographs illustrate two ways of approaching design. One favours reason over instinct and is pre-occupied with style and control. The other seeks to accommodate the everyday activities of people in generally straightforward ways and believes that style is something conferred by others after the fact. It is less concerned with control but is very conscious of practicability. Over the past hundred years much of architectural design and city planning has been governed by the first approach and continues to be so today. I am skeptical of this philosophy and prefer one that engages those for whom the design is being made and accepts the importance of context. Such an approach to design demands patience, considerable practical skill and recognizes that creativity is an elusive thing unbound by convention.

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Industrial Design

Photo 1 shows an object we are all familiar with—a Canada Post mailbox. This is an award-winning design, both elegant and functional. It is easy to use and is virtually maintenance-free. The sloped top not only sheds rain but also prevents anyone from leaning on it comfortably or placing anything on top of it. It would be difficult to use this object for any purpose other than that for which it was designed.

The objects in photo 2 have not, to my knowledge, won any design awards. I am not sure I would call them elegant and from time to time they exasperate their users by taking cash while failing to deliver the product. They have flat tops, they come in various sizes and if you watch them long enough you will see people leaning against them, sitting on them, or placing their coffee cups or brief cases on top of them. I am reasonably sure their designers had none of this in mind, and I do not know what their reaction would be to the many ways in which these objects are used.

Prescriptions for Use

In photo 3 we see park furniture arranged conveniently around a pond. These seats, like the Canada Post mailbox, are elegant and functional. They are made from bent steel tub-

