

Building for the community

The sprawl and spread of the great metropolitan cities may have outmoded the concentrated civic center.

What many cities need now are little centers—all over town.

Are civic centers obsolete?

BY RICHARD A. MILLER

FROM "CARL MILLES," BY MEYRIC R. ROGERS. YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS





Spires of Wren's churches gave seventeenth-century London a well-defined neighborhood pattern.

Like Sir Christopher Wren's spired churches in seventeenth-century London, the community buildings which will be built in the decade ahead should be located where they can best serve the city and the people who will use them. They should proclaim their purpose and improve their environs. And they should give the spread-out cities a visually apparent sense of order.

There is a distinct parallel between Wren's problem and the situation facing city planners today. London before the great fire of 1666 was an intolerable chaos, not unlike the chaos of many American cities today. Wren wanted to rebuild London according to a grand plan, as Haussmann was later able to do in Paris. But when his plan was rejected, Wren seized upon the opportunity of rebuilding the churches to give London a far more subtle organization. His churches (drawing above) served as neighborhood focal points and their spires made the city's new organization clearly visible. That is precisely what most U.S. cities need today—multiple, manageable centers of civic life.

Unfortunately, few of today's city planners have either Wren's flexibility—or his perceptiveness. Today's "civic centers" tend toward the grandomania of the Place de la Concorde in Paris (or the more modest Piazza San Marco in Venice) even though to obtain it they often must isolate themselves from the city they are supposed to serve. No Grand Boulevards or twisting Fondamentas reach into the city from these "centers." Both the downtown area and the residential neighborhoods are usually miles away. And precisely because the functional ties between



St. Louis civic center has at its center Sculptor Carl Milles' famed fountain, "The Meeting of the Waters." Despite its delightfulness, the center itself is too big and too concentrated. Consequently, the adjacent downtown, declining fast itself, is unaided by the center.

the civic center and the city have been so poorly established—or are totally lacking—more than one center now abuilding is likely to become a focus of future blight rather than culture. That is what happened in St. Louis (photo opposite).

Indeed, the monumental civic center, embracing all elements from city hall to art museum, may be obsolete. Of course, some central focus, or, rather, foci, are still essential in every city, big, medium, or small. Libraries, post offices, and police stations, for example, need central headquarters, but they also need branches close to the living neighborhoods of the city. Like the human heart, civic centers cannot work if they are cut off from the blood stream of city life. Many of the cultural elements of the city in fact—government as well as private—cannot be centralized at all. Churches and schools, indeed, consist almost entirely of "branches" now. Even where the cultural facility is one of a kind—such as a civic auditorium—the logical and fundamental relationship is usually to "downtown" rather than to any artificial civic "center."

Faulkner's courthouse square

This interweave of community buildings with the city they serve was instinctively built into the turn-of-the-century town square. William Faulkner describes this interrelationship well in his fictional Jefferson, Mississippi: "A square, the courthouse in its grove the center; quadrangular around it, the stores, two story, the offices of the lawyers and doctors and dentists, the lodge rooms and auditoriums above them; school and church and tavern and bank and jail each in its ordered place; the four broad diverging avenues straight as plumb lines in the four directions, becoming the network of roads and byroads until the county would be covered with it."

If the limits of this typical turn-of-the-century civic center could be stretched far enough to en-

compass today's widespread city, it might still work. But in most large cities, burgeoning urban development, the concomitant expansion of government, social, and cultural needs, and the advent of the automobile have made such an uncomplicated solution impossible—no matter how big the square or how high the buildings. And, urban renewal notwithstanding, no one has any serious plans for rebuilding the entire city. Thus, Wren's second choice is the only realistic one available today. Like his churches, community buildings must be tucked in where they fit and where they can do the most good.

The standards

Unhappily for planners and architects who like simple solutions, this tucking-in must proceed with infinite care. There is no textbook situation, no standard solution. But there are some standards:

▶ The first thing to keep in mind is that cities range from mammoth concentrations like New York or Chicago to small cities like Larchmont, New York or Lake Charles, Louisiana. As a rule, the concentration of community buildings can be increased in inverse ratio to the size of the city. The single police station in Larchmont becomes a hundred police stations in New York. The city hall and civic auditorium in Lake Charles can be situated downtown and still be adjacent to each other, but in Chicago the proper place for one building downtown may be far removed from another.

▶ The second thing to remember is that cities are, in effect, living organisms constantly growing and changing. Any viable plan for the city, therefore, must be highly flexible. As London grew in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for example, other churches were able to take their place in Wren's pattern very easily. Indeed, the pattern remained a predominant influence in London from the time of the fire to the middle of the nineteenth century—a period when London's growth equalled that of any American city today. Today's civic centers, even with holes left in them for "planned" growth, are bound to create problems when the city hall has to be expanded or the civic auditorium needs a new wing for exhibition space. Cleveland, Ohio, now planning expansion of its monumental civic center, is grateful that Daniel Burnham's railroad station at the end of the mall was never built—it left a convenient hole for expansion of convention facilities.

▶ The third thing to keep in mind is that planning civic facilities is not only a science but an art. After all the traffic counts and habit surveys have been taken, the women's club may quite rightly decide (as it did in Elyria, Ohio) to buy a fine old house

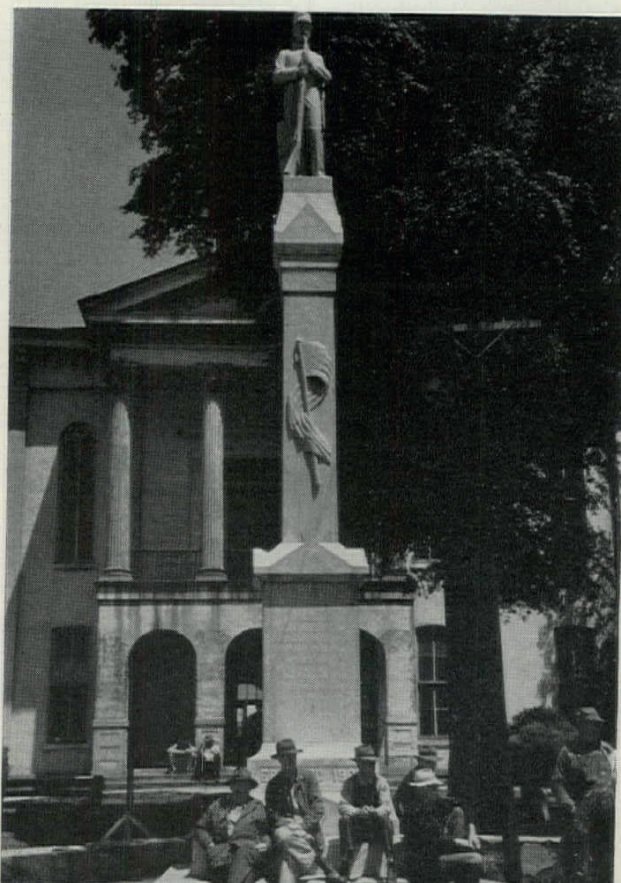
and remodel it simply because the ladies like the house and want to save it.

Often the forces tending to disperse the civic center are the particular needs of the individual civic services. Librarians, for example, consider their books a commodity and prefer a retail-type location downtown. Branch libraries are commonly located in elementary schools, but many librarians would prefer a location next to a supermarket in an outlying shopping center. The art museum, however, is "one of a kind" in most cities. The preferred location for it seems to be, not in the center of downtown, but on the edge (as in Newark, New Jersey and Portland, Oregon) to encourage trips from home and tours from the schools.

Museum Expert Laurence Vail Coleman points out that "propinquity to the point of having several museums under one roof is disadvantageous, and so is the scheme of building a museum as a wing of a library or public archives, or as a part of a community building, or courthouse, or convention hall."

The convention hall, indeed, has unique problems of its own, not the least of which is its discouraging bulk. As a convention facility, it should be within walking distance of as many hotel rooms and

Courthouse and square in sleepy Oxford, Mississippi is the model for Faulkner's Jefferson center in *Requiem for a Nun*. This particular civic focal point is still vital (partly because of Faulkner's protective vigilance) but it is a vanishing American phenomenon.



HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON—MAGNUM

good restaurants (and stores and strip-tease joints) as possible. But the building cannot be plunked down in the middle of these subsidiary facilities because its bulk would ruin the district. A location at the edge of the hotel area containing these facilities, therefore, is usually best (as in Detroit); but the architect should not put the entrance to his convention hall on the far-from-downtown end of the building (as happened in Cleveland, Ohio).

Government buildings—the city hall, fire station, and police stations—which were long the nucleus of most civic centers, tend themselves to be dispersed today. The reason is obvious. Fire and police buildings, for example, are best located at a central point in the street network, and with the building of expressways, this point rarely intersects with the best location for the mayor's office or the council chamber. Service agencies (such as the water and park departments) increasingly favor headquarters locations adjacent to their operating facilities. In Philadelphia, where two new government office-type buildings will be erected, the city also plans to remodel and expand the old city hall in Penn Center to house the mayor and the council—thus retaining a symbolic center of government in the heart of the city.

Sharing in the suburbs

This pattern of dispersion of public community buildings is also becoming characteristic of private community facilities. The Salvation Army wants to be "where the need for our service is heaviest." Family service agencies, which provide psychological aid to disturbed families, generally prefer inconspicuous locations on the edge of the central business district, often taking an old house rather than a new building. Other community welfare agencies, often under the aegis of the Community or United Fund, are building office buildings to house many functions, but the generally preferred location is right in among the other office buildings of the central city. Unions and Chambers of Commerce uniformly prefer locations near the business enterprises they serve.

In Cleveland, Ohio, a common desire to establish good scattered locations for branch facilities led the YMCA and the YWCA to build six new buildings on a joint basis. According to Grace Martins, associate director of the Community Division of the YWCA, "The suburbs are increasingly numerous and homogeneous. It may be necessary for us to share facilities in the suburbs, but we must have separate facilities in the downtown area to care for our interracial and intercultural interests."

An example of fairly effective spotting of civic facilities within a city-wide framework is found

GEORGE CERRINA



The Campidoglio in Rome, sandwiched between an old church and a hillside of ducal palaces, is a masterpiece of architectural adaptation to a difficult site. Civic architects face similar challenges today.

among Protestant churches now acting through committees of comity in most major U.S. cities. These committees are formed under the guidance of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. When the Presbyterians, for example, decide to move from their old church downtown, the committee of comity helps establish it in a neighborhood not adequately served by churches—including churches of other Protestant denominations. Then, when the Methodists decide to move, they are encouraged to move to another neighborhood rather than directly next door to the Presbyterians. Thus, each church serves an entire Protestant neighborhood besides serving the confirmed, third-generation members of the particular denomination scattered throughout the community.

Actually, a city and its community facilities represents a vast overlay and interplay of networks on many levels—networks of interests, ages, beliefs; networks of people, each with desires and needs and conflicts and social inclinations. To a large extent the city builds itself through these networks. It grows, like the human body, in ways too complex to be completely understood. But to aid this process, a well-staffed, city-wide committee of comity, operating under the planning commission, is needed.

Such a committee must first be concerned with the availability of each kind of service over the entire city. The committee might initially conduct a survey of all existing community facilities similar to the community recreation studies prepared for some 12 Ohio cities by Landscape Architect Marion Packard and Doctor Arthur Daniels. These studies list the existing community services, evaluate their facilities, and ascertain their plans for the future.

Unfortunately, such a study in one city would have very little in common with studies in other cities. Some help could be obtained from national agencies such as the National Recreation Association, the American Craftsmen's Council, or the American Federation of Arts. More help could be

obtained by way of the national offices of organizations represented locally. But in the main, each city's problems are unique.

To encourage the creation of neighborhood focal points and a rich blend of scattered cultural facilities there would, of course, have to be some fundamental changes in public policy and law. Highway planners would have to consider matters other than traffic count and right-of-way costs (as they did in Detroit, Michigan) as determinants of location. Equally important, urban renewal planners and new subdivision builders would probably have to be required by law to leave adequate open land for essential community buildings in their plans. And, community facilities, whether sponsored by government or nonprofit private agencies, would need some assistance from the community as a whole in site acquisition. One technique for providing this aid was suggested in a recent report by the New York chapters of the A.I.A. and A.I.P.: establish a separate zoning category for community-use sites.

Shoehorning in

Only after all these steps have been taken, can something really rational be done about effective and handsome groupings of civic buildings to create focal points or areas. True, this concept might limit those planners who think of civic design merely as a process of shoving block models around on a small-scale drawing of vacant acreage. But, for any designer who has observed the way Michelangelo shoehorned his magnificent Campidoglio in Rome between an existing church and a hillside of ducal palaces (see photo, page 97), there should be no reason for despair. The strength of civic design would be found in its limitations—where any vital form is found. A truly civic architecture does not gain its main importance from its bulk and majesty, however, but from the influence it exerts on the environment around it. A library, properly placed downtown with, perhaps, a square in front of it, establishes a distinctive character for the whole district in which it is placed.

In seeking to express this kind of civic design, architects could well study Wren's techniques in London. He built porches over the sidewalk so the churches could be seen from up and down the street, he used existing open spaces for entrance yards. He raised spires above the sky line, and today his accomplishment is acknowledged to be noble civic architecture—a fitting challenge to the great designs of Augustus' Rome and Napoleon III's Paris. If the architects and planners of U.S. community buildings can do as well in the decade ahead, American cities will be civilized places indeed.

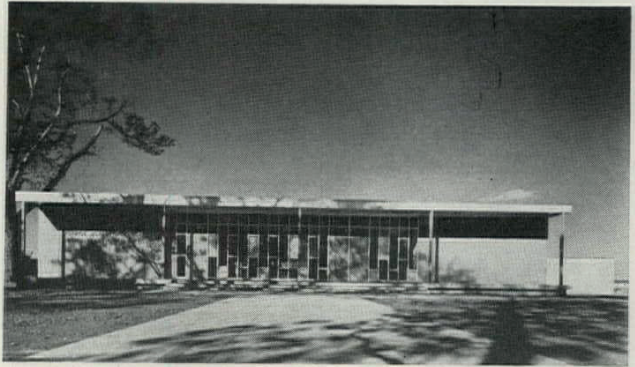
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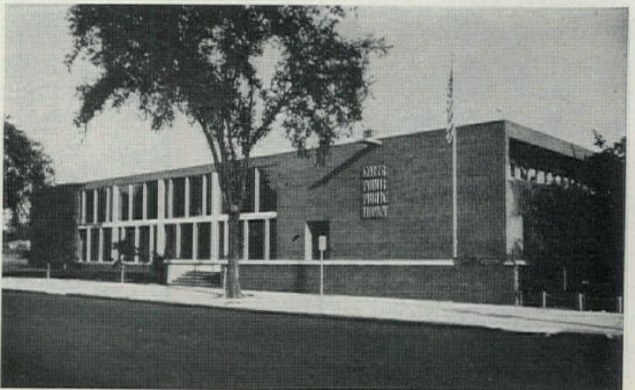
ROLAND CHATHAM



GOVERNMENT SERVICES

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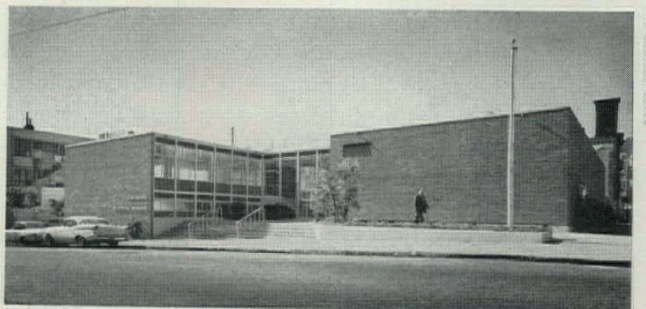
LENS-ART PHOTO



LIBRARIES

(3)

BALTAR KOHAR



CLUBS AND ASSOCIATIONS

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ROGER STURTEVANT

CHURCHES

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JOE MUNROE