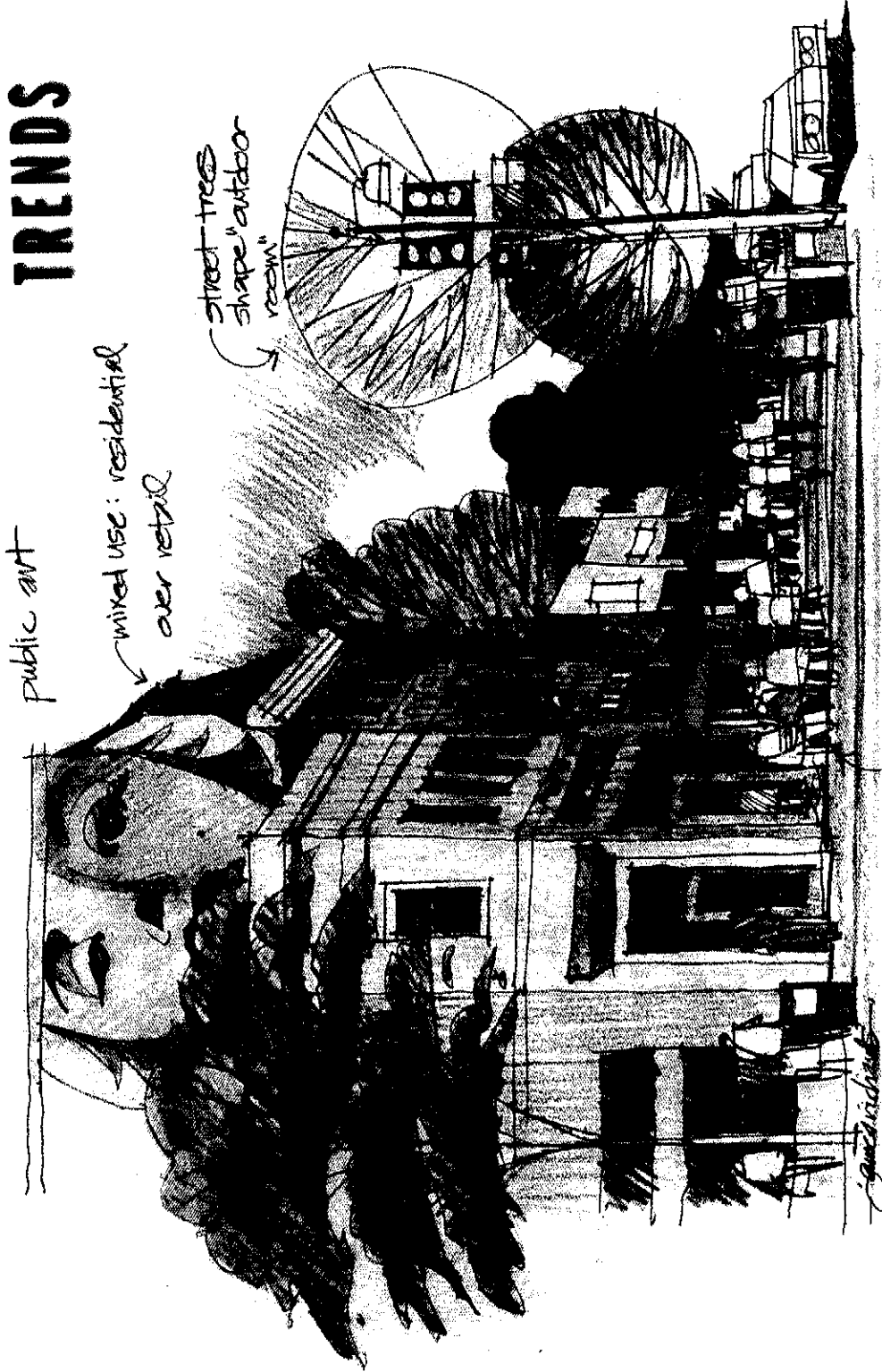


# TRENDS



Public art  
 mixed use: residential over retail  
 street trees shape outdoor room  
 generous sidewalk  
 on-street parking  
 cafe culture of "third places"

## PLACEMAKING FOR THE CREATIVE CLASS

Emerging trends offer opportunities for landscape architects. By James Richards, ASLA

**S**AN FRANCISCO, Seattle, and Austin, Texas, have it. Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin want it. It's the Creative Class, a term coined by social theorist and author Richard Florida to describe the software designers, scientists, engineers, architects, artists, writers—and yes, landscape architects—whose ideas are driving what many trend watchers see as a new, global economic order.

Florida isn't alone. Futurist Tom Peters observes that American business, long driven by price and in more recent decades by quality, is now focused squarely on creati-

ity and those who bring it to the table—what he succinctly calls "Awesome Talent." The dramatic advances in technology that have helped empower talent, the more mobile and less tied to traditional employment centers. This has enabled young, creative professionals to make place and quality-of-life issues their first priority in choosing where to live and pursue work.

Indeed, as Florida states in *Rise of the Creative Class*, place is "becoming the central organizing unit of our economy and society, taking on the role that used to be played by the large corporation." Peters concurs,

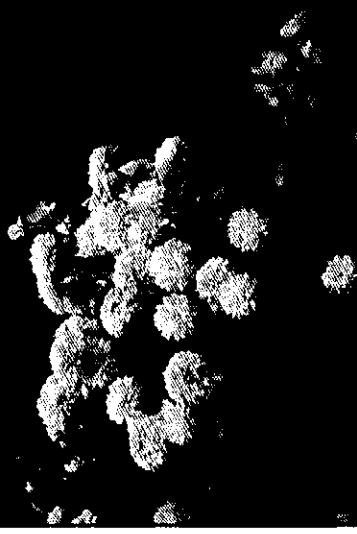
Key urban design attributes come together in this inviting urban village in Washington, D.C., providing an architectural identity and social nexus for the neighborhood.

insisting that "to attract, retain, and obtain the most from Awesome Talent, organizations will need to offer up an Awesome Place to Work." This implies more than a stimulating physical plant; it points to regions, cities, and districts where innovation and creative opportunity can flourish.

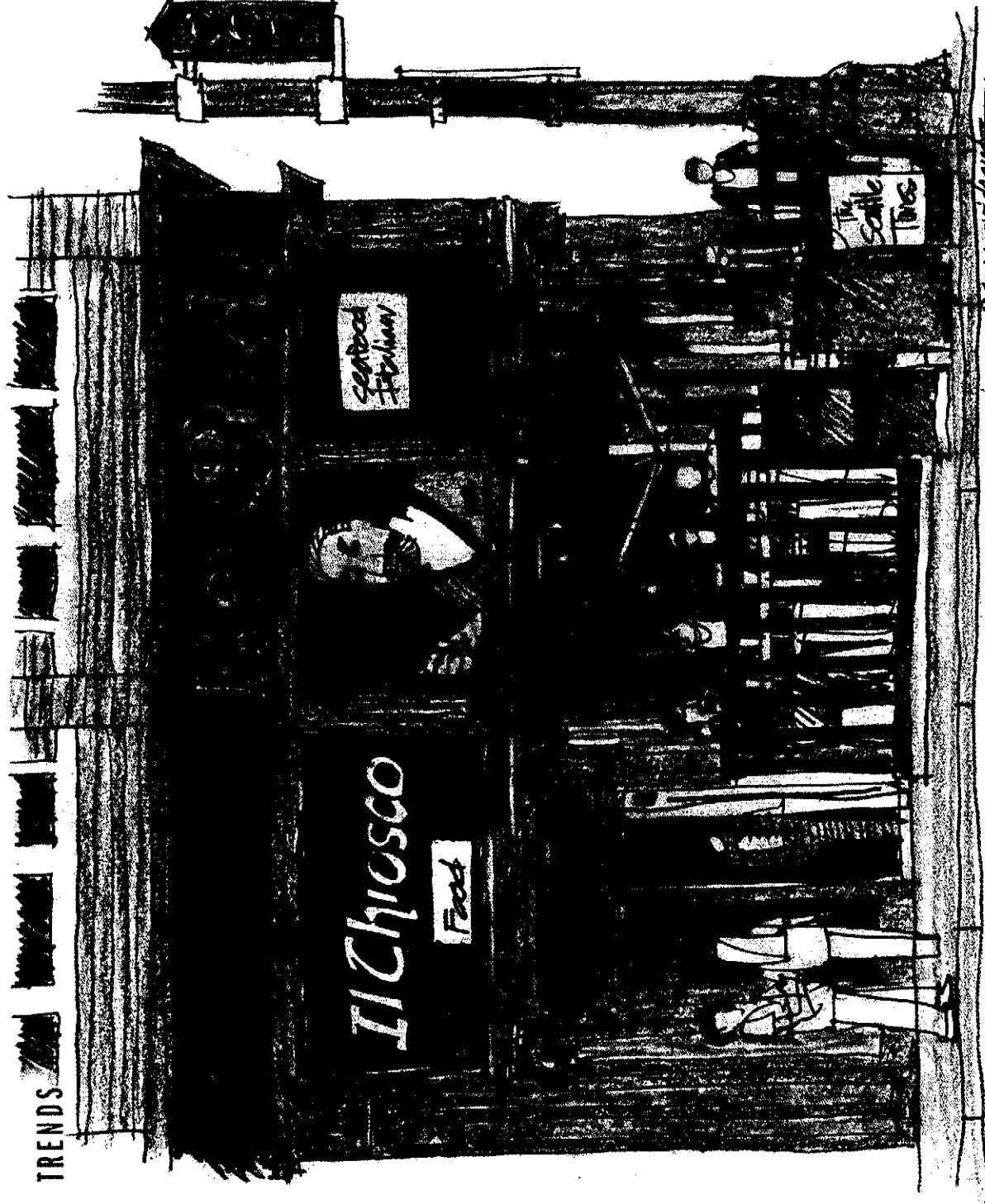
Some cities attract more of this roving talent pool than others. Florida's research highlights this phenomenon through a measure he calls the "Creativity Index," which ranks more than 260 regions in the United States based on quantitative indicators of their creative activity and opportunity. For example, San Francisco and Austin score very high in the Creativity Index, due to a confluence of attributes

DRAWINGS AND PHOTOS BY JAMES RICHARDS

The Wellspring Collection. Furnishings designed with "tea theatre and retirement in mind"



landscape for



that include percentage of the workforce in creative occupations and patents per capita, among others. By the same factors, Memphis, Tennessee, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, score low. Where a community ranks in the Creativity Index and how a city might better position itself to become the next Austin or Seattle are fueling an ever-growing number of debates in places ranging from academia to coffee shops to Chamber of Commerce meetings.

The response to these ideas from leaders of cities across the country and abroad has been remarkable. Attracting talent and creativity has become a driving discussion point for economic policy. Self-styled "creative city" initiatives such as Governor Granholm's "Cool Commissions," Creative

**A stimulus-rich environment: At Seattle's Pioneer Square, a preserved building, interesting details, delightful signage, and alfresco dining contribute greatly to the public realm.**

Cincinnati, and Vancouver's Creative City Task Force are springing up across the country and abroad. "Quality of place" is finding itself near the top of city and regional economic development strategies. Florida's work has produced its own crop

of skeptics, to be sure, but this much seems clear: Creative ideas make the world go round, a handful of highly livable cities consistently attracts the lion's share of creative talent, and these cities offer lessons in placemaking that others can learn from.

Of course, many landscape architects who follow these trends are tempted to look up from their plans and models and say, "Welcome to the party—what took you so long?" Since Olmsted, we've always championed

**A handful of highly livable cities consistently attracts the lion's share of creative talent, and these cities offer lessons in placemaking that others can learn from.**

**Transportation choice by design: This Seattle street, left, employs a range of strategies to balance the needs of walkers and cyclists with those of autos and transit. Public markets, below, are unmatched for colorful sights, smells, and activity. Seattle and Washington, D.C., have famous permanent markets; Austin, Texas, closes a city street on weekends for busy vendors' stalls and local musicians.**

creativity, what kind of places would we propose to create?

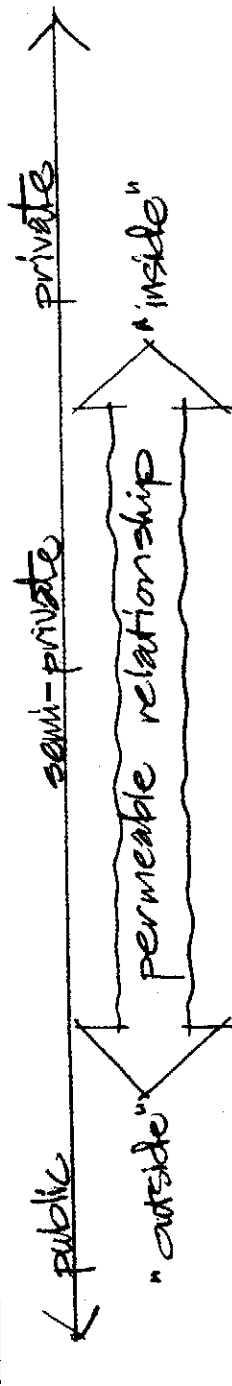
The question calls for the type of qualitative observational research that landscape architects are particularly well suited for, and it became the foundation for my master's thesis for the University of Texas at Arlington. For a seasoned observer of cities, the self-imposed charge seemed straightforward: go to three of the creative hubs ranking highest in Florida's Creativity Index—Seattle, Austin, and Washington, D.C.—to try to determine the extent to which their physical planning and design attributes contribute to a culture of creativity. The

But the emergence of a "creative economy" challenges designers and planners to look at the intersection of place and human potential through a slightly different lens. If we are asked to view our aim as creating physical settings that foster human

the notion that the well-being of the individual and society was the altruistic foundation of our efforts. Certainly Lawrence Halprin owned the idea when he proclaimed in his classic book *Cities* that "The ultimate purpose of a city in our times is to provide a creative environment for people to live in. By creative, I mean a city which has great diversity and thus allows for freedom of choice."

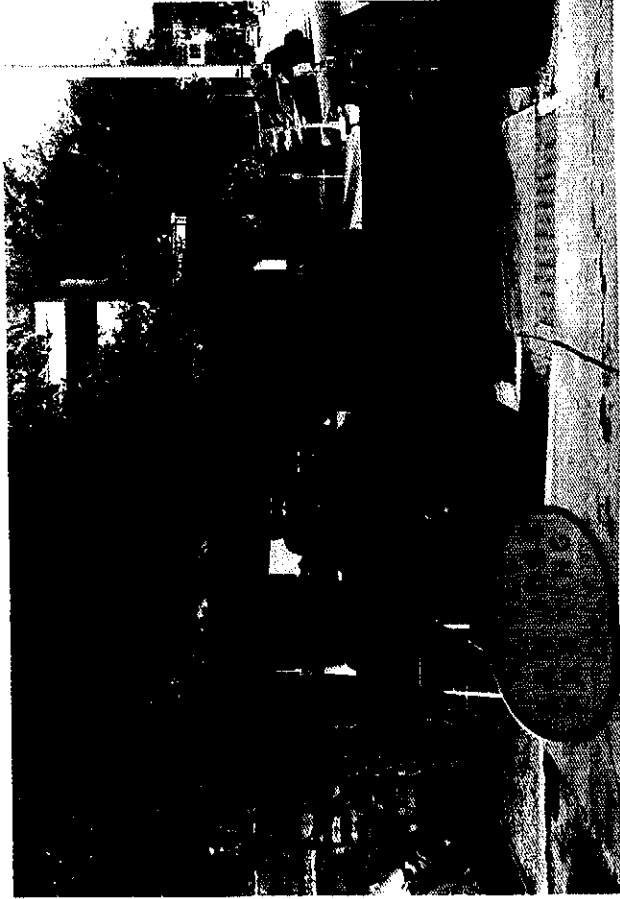


TRENDS



challenge called for open-ended interviews with younger talents in creative occupations, followed by serious investment in shoe leather observing and analyzing the physical character, arrangements, and design attributes that made these places appealing to them. Though I had visited these cities in the past, this study called for a more consistent and efficient approach. I arranged four-day stays in each city to facilitate both daytime and nighttime fieldwork on both weekdays and weekends, beginning each day by 8 AM and ending by 2 AM. While rapidly conducted, the field analysis had the advantage of a fresh view by objective and experienced eyes. The mission was clear. I would seek out common threads. I would search for "cool."

The most active "third places" were observed to have a permeable relationship between the public realm and the private establishment, top, fostering activity and interaction. Great people watching and conversation occur at this Austin eatery, right, where the line between public sidewalk and dining terrace is blurred.



Other interviewees, including a writer in Austin, cited specifics: "We want to be able to walk and bike, but not just to cafés and stupidly expensive clothing stores. Yes, we want cheap breakfast tacos and a corner store to buy smokes and a bar stumbling distance from home.

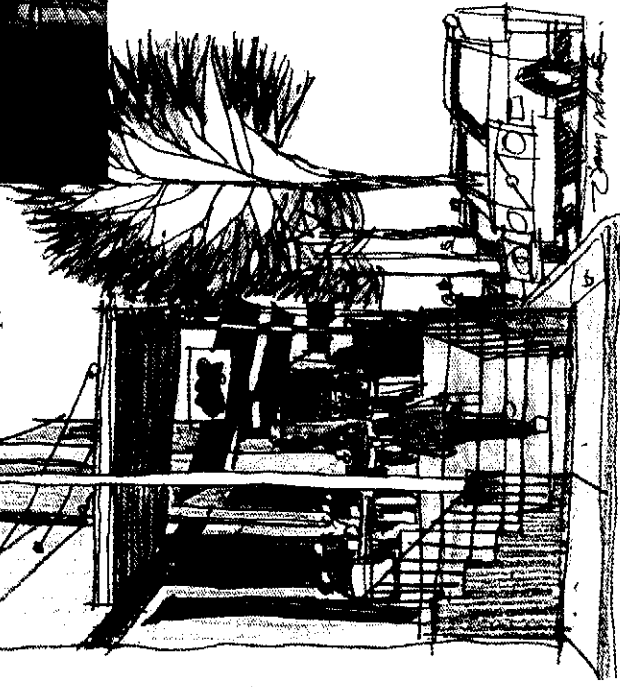
But we also want it to be a real neighborhood with all the basic necessities of life. It's not just traditional features like grid streets, buildings up front and parking in the rear, public spaces, and so on. Any place we flock to has to be cheap, needs to



Lively street scenes in hip districts like Austin's SoCo, above, challenge traditional notions of streetscape design. Funky is good. Districts and buildings with age and grit can offer lower rents to locally owned establishments, resulting in unique destinations attractive to a creative clientele.

have some age and grit and decay, and needs to be as corporate-free as possible."

Interestingly, when asked to name their most cherished aspects of their city—what made it cool—no one pointed to the iconic works of modern landscape architecture in their midst. No Gas Works or Freeway Park; no Pershing Square. Rather, interview subjects gushed over their interconnected preserves and greenways, their walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods, old buildings, good transit, cultural opportunities, and the coffee shops, alfresco tables, and bookstores that provide informal venues for meetings, conversation, and exchanging ideas.



What Makes A Creative Cityscape?

THESE WERE THE MOST CONSISTENTLY observed physical attributes in the city districts most favored by interview subjects:

- An interconnected green framework that provides natural gateways, strong edges, a wide choice of recreational outlets, and a variety of landscape experiences.
- A traditional, compact urban grid that maximizes walkability, connectivity, route choice, and corner locations for commerce.

■ Distinctive, self-contained neighborhoods that provide a full mix of uses within walking distance and instill a sense of ownership.

■ A mixed-use urban village that provides essential services and defines the architectural and social identity of the neighborhood.

■ A range of viable transportation choices, including transit and private auto, that link districts, neighborhoods, and walkable enclaves. Street infrastructure is designed to be friendly to bicycles, scooters, and especially pedestrians.

■ A vital realm of public spaces

and walkable streets that fosters an active public life of schmoozing, alfresco dining, jogging, viewing art, and engaging in impromptu conversations. The public realm is energized by adjacencies to a vibrant mix of activity-generating uses.

■ A wealth of "third places" distinct from home and work—coffee shops, internet cafés, pubs, bookstores, and the like—that foster a "café culture" of informal gathering, conversing, and exchanging ideas. The best of these are inextricably linked to the public realm.

■ Old buildings and districts that

lend character and authenticity and that provide lower rent options for creative entrepreneurs and urban pioneers.

■ A range of cultural opportunities, preferably free, from live theater and formal galleries to street performance and public art, adding richness to the urban experience.

■ A stimulus-rich environment of complexity, variety, and choice that engages both the senses and the intellect through elements such as architecture, public space design, open markets, sidewalk commerce, and signage that doubles as art.

## TRENDS

On-site fieldwork revealed that despite obvious differences in geographic location, physiography, and scenic character, the three cities share remarkably similar attributes in terms of their physical "DNA," revealing common threads that could indeed inform placemaking elsewhere. These observations (see sidebar, "What Makes a Creative Cityscape?"), along with the attitudes and values of the intervening subjects, can be distilled into overarching principles (see sidebar, "Places to Flourish: Four Principles") that can guide the full range of strategies for growth and change, from creation of open space linkages to concepts that maximize informal encounters in a plaza.

These principles and strategies don't break radical new ground as much as they uncover timeless principles, as they are rooted in the successful attributes of places that have thrived over the long term. But they deviate from most current land planning and development practices to the extent that their implementation necessitates policy and regulatory changes in most cities. More important, they provide

### Places to Flourish: Four Principles

- **DIVERSITY**, both cultural and environmental, celebrates interesting juxtapositions: great new buildings and great old ones, established affluence and upstarts, upscale retail and funky mom-and-pop shops, car and bus and walking, all coexisting in a richly complex and stimulating environment.
- **CHOICE**, a direct outgrowth of diversity, offers the ability to select from a range of attractive alternatives for everything from housing to transportation options, from working environments to leisure time pursuits, from urban vitality to places of solace.
- **AUTHENTICITY** was seen by interferences in preserved natural features; older buildings; traditional, self-contained neighborhoods; and a predominance of independent, locally owned businesses. The aggregate is a distinctive place whose character is a reflection of the uniqueness of its locale.
- **CONNECTIONS**—to people, to other ideas, to nature, to history, to culture, to inspiration—are the lifeblood of creativity. Places designed to maximize human and environmental connections maximize creative opportunity.

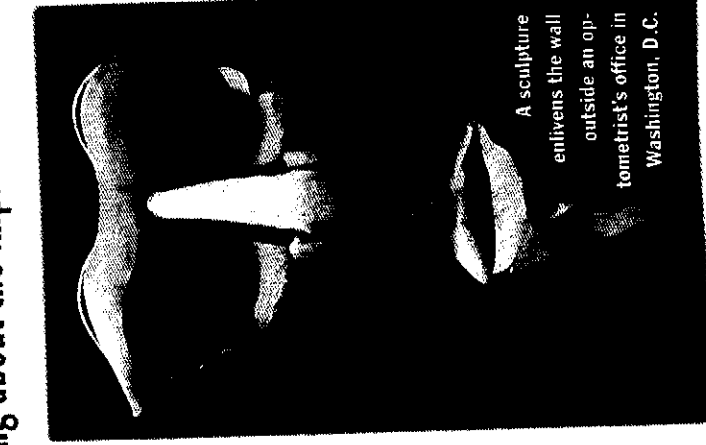
our own day-to-day projects. While envisioning a creative city should begin at the policy level, the physical reshaping of our communities happens, in fact, one designed project at a time. Every streetscape, infill, office plaza, or public park project either enhances diversity, choice, and creative opportunity or frustrates them. If part of our aim is to establish a creative milieu, we will make design choices that further that goal.

At the same time, for such an agenda to be successful, appropriate principles and strategies must be addressed comprehensively. As one interview subject stated, "It's more than just a case of, if you build the loft apartments, the hipsters will come." None of these issues exists in a vacuum; decisions and actions in one area affect many others. All should be considered in a comprehensive fashion.

Is the Creative Class truly driving a new economic order? Time will tell. Are the attributes of places they value, such as diversity, choice, and authenticity, worthy aspirations around which to shape cities? Halprin thought so. So do the growing number of business and community leaders who are reexamining their plans and growth strategies with the Creative Class in mind.

Kevin Lynch, author of *The Image of the*

### Thinking of cities as incubators of innovation and creativity gives landscape architects another way of thinking about the impact of our own day-to-day projects.



A sculpture entwines the wall outside an optometrist's office in Washington, D.C.

*City*, points out that "a highly developed art of urban design is linked to the creation of a critical and attentive audience." The political and business leaders of scores of cities are actively trying to determine exactly what it means to grow a city that attracts and nurtures human potential. They need inspired design guidance rooted in the careful observation of successful, creative environments. Landscape architects, by virtue of the broad range of issues and project scales we touch, are in a unique position to provide this guidance. We have our attentive audience. We cannot afford to miss the opportunity.

E. A. H.

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