

Letter from the Editors

In the wake of the 2008-09 election cycle, “Change” continues to be a buzzword—if not an imperative—among politicians and the public. *Agora 2009* reflects this mindfulness of making positive changes, as this year’s issue (our third edition) represents the most interdisciplinary collection of work we have published to date. Our contributors hail from eight different academic programs throughout the University, and collaboration amongst the Urban Planning and Urban Design programs in publishing this year’s issue was far greater than in the two years prior. In addition, our staff has gone to lengths to include more artistic and photographic work than ever before to complement the fine narrative work of our selected contributors.

Change is also the theme of this year’s issue. For urban planners, designers, and theorists, navigating the dynamic between change and the status quo is a familiar if frustrating exercise. Often, the slow evolution of incrementalism is adopted as a default—a way to continue moving boundaries in positive directions while appealing to a diverse constituency. But as broad-based support for a more dramatic, impactful change grows, urbanists are presented with a rare window for advancing their cause. How will we take advantage of this opportunity, and how will we inform our actions?

Agora 2009 reflects just a handful of the many ways in which this question can be answered. We begin with Matthew Schildkret’s reflective essay on the MLK Symposium, “The Character of Change.” Here, the need is highlighted for economic and spatial redistribution through equity planning, and the author considers that there is not only content to an individual’s character, but to the character of the change that we enable as a society. This year’s MLK event was very much a call to action for planners, one sounded for decades but particularly resonant in the midst of a historic economic and financial crisis.

In “A Tale of Two Crises,” Amanda Tillotson compares the current subprime foreclosure crisis—a key precipitant of the current situation—to the farm crisis of the 1980s, asking why only the latter generated broadly remedial policies and increased public support for victims of the crisis. By attributing this result to patterns of public discourse developed during the process of issue definition and policy development, Tillotson reminds us that framing and rhetoric are critical tools for urban policy stakeholders. The narrative we construct at the outset can have considerable determinative influence for years to come, a lesson with clear implications for planning.

Taking this historically-informed perspective into the urban design context, Christian Runge in “Beyond the Pink Flamingo” offers a case study of Baltimore as a vehicle for the ecological urban landscape. Drawing on his own familiarity with the city, he highlights the importance of generating place-specific urban landscapes that have the potential to evolve over time. The form of cities is often the most visible marker of change, and here we note—as with policy—being evolutionary does not require ignoring our past.

Often, being forward-thinking happens in an urban context where it seems an obvious necessity. In our next article, we deal with change coming to a place that could not be more different from the Rust Belt city of Baltimore: Las Vegas, Nevada. Allison Craddock, in “LEED-ing Las Vegas,” shows that even in the unlikeliest of places, new practices can take hold and flourish. Adaptation and the importance of individual initiative are illustrated as important pillars of the change ethos.

Our next piece succinctly illustrates the tension that is inevitably created when precipitous change is on the horizon. Nathan Geisler’s personal account from Miami, Florida, “Dealing with Density,” discusses one of the many friction points in the change/preservation debate encountered by planners and designers. It points to the fact that not every push away from the status quo is necessarily positive. Geisler studies this conflict in the context of land use politics, specifically Miami’s urban development boundary, and uses his experience as a community organizer in the area to chart the struggle between urban sprawl and a campaign to “hold the [UDB] line” by using infill densification.

Infill development and densification, increasingly, seem to be key elements of sustainable urbanist rhetoric, and in the two urban design features profiled in *Agora 2009* they are among the common guiding principles of two projects that encompass vastly different geographic scopes. In our first proposal, Danna Reyes examines what bold change could mean for New York by “Reimagining the Lower East Side Manhattan.” Reyes does not shy away from extremely ambitious change in illustrating a thought-provoking design for a huge portion of Lower Manhattan. Her “reimagination” includes reorienting Manhattan’s famous grid, introducing a new system of water-based transportation in an urban setting, and developing a modern transparent building typology. In contrast, Daren Crabill’s plan for Ann Arbor’s core entitled “5th and Division” focuses on examining change on a much more intimate scale. The site for this project implies a narrowly defined scope of intervention, and Crabill focuses his efforts on creating an elegant public plaza accompanied by new infill development.

Crabill’s investigation of the public realm is again on display in his essay “Project for Public Spaces” which offers a critique of the firm by the same name. Case studies of both Campus Martius and Bryant Park show that if this non-profit entity realized that their partner design firms have similar community-focused goals, the resulting public spaces might benefit from greater cohesion and a thorough integrated design process. The overall message is familiar from earlier articles: community participation is integral to effective change (Schildkret, Runge, and Geisler), and so is rhetoric (Tillotson).

An emphasis of the importance of rhetoric continues with Rachana Ky’s response to Michael Sorkin’s “The End(s) of Urban Design.” Ky’s article—“Pessimism, Nihilism, Sorkinism”—explores New Urbanism and the classic arguments against it, and concludes that a critical approach grounded in negativity and generalization ultimately offers little to advance the field. A call for change unaccompanied by a clear understanding of what is wrong or a viable alternative is ultimately a hollow request, one that can undermine even the best of intentions.

The final articles of our issue on Change return to two traditional areas of planning that are facing broad, new possibilities – transportation and public investment in our communities. In “A Comparative Study of U.S. and Swiss Transportation Systems” by Marie Clarence Chollet, the author discusses her adoptive and home countries. Here, the potential for adaptation and adoption crosses borders, though the emphasis is less on policy prescriptions than on the fact that there is space for improvement in a specific area. Lastly, we return to the historically-informed approach to change with which we began *Agora 2009* by examining the evolution of the Community Development Block Grant in Megan Gilster’s “Bogging Down the Neighborhood.” By looking at the interactions of local residents, activists, service providers, and leadership with regard to a historically celebrated and maligned government program, Gilster gives planners and designers a bird’s-eye view of how change is manifested in the real world.

At the outset of this letter, we referred to “Change,” somewhat accusingly, as a buzzword. With the publication of *Agora 2009*, it is our hope that the strong call to change that has emerged amounts to more than a whining crescendo. If not, then we will have transformed a true window of opportunity into little more than a passing fad. Only if we take this momentum and create change, not just in the air but on the ground, will we see it take hold as a sustainable movement. We hope you enjoy reading this third issue of *Agora: The Urban Planning and Design Journal of The University of Michigan*, but—more importantly—we hope that it contributes to a positive ethos of change and informs some of your own efforts in creating our future urban fabric.

Sincerely,

Thomas Skuzinski and Scott Curry
Co-Editors-in-Chief