Thank you for your “Gateway Cities” issue [Summer 2009]. I would like to underscore the importance of strengthening civic life in these cities. This is more than a platitude — it’s the most fundamental element of their long-term recovery. When residents are not connected to each other or to public life, it is easier for low expectations to develop, and for institutions, services, and quality of life to erode.

While these bad habits usually develop over decades, it is possible to begin turning it around quickly. The first step is to create forums where residents, businesspeople, municipal officials, and nonprofits can come together to share information, build trust, establish personal relationships, and have constructive public discussion. Turning these conversations into a shared long-term vision for the city that everyone can relate to and get excited about is the next step. This has been shown to be another element of successful revitalization stories in places like Chattanooga, Youngstown, and Kalamazoo.

Furthermore, place-making and economic development initiatives that support the vision should be designed to build the assets and improve the quality of life for the people who already live in these cities. The middle-class families that policy-makers so desperately covet will not in the short-term be attracted from the outside — they will be grown from the working-class families who already live there.

Andre Leroux
Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance
Lawrence, Massachusetts
Co-author, Voices from Forgotten Cities

Matthew Frederick’s article “Radical Urbanism” [Summer 2009] was truly a breath of fresh air. The problems with the planning process he mentions are even evident at the small-town level, where I live and work, where big-city planning restrictions and requirements are put in place with little or no thought to the effect on the small town’s economy and what made that small-town lifestyle so appealing. It’s interesting that the current approaches to planning are attempting to duplicate that same small-town feeling in minutely planned new communities that often cost huge dollars to move into and live in. Meanwhile, small towns are still using older planning schemes that sap the vitality out of their downtowns, leaving vacant buildings that are limited by planning laws to one possible use, killing any hope for the revitalization of that same downtown core.

This whole problem is another example of the “central planning” type of thinking that is evident throughout our society, at every level of government. There is a real fear in some circles of allowing people the freedom to pursue their own self-interest, thereby benefiting the culture as a whole.

We can only hope that Mr. Frederick’s thinking becomes more widespread, but it may be too late for many small towns and communities in this country. We have become a culture of dependents, trusting not in ourselves and our own efforts and initiative, but in government’s benevolence for our well-being. And government is always ready to take that responsibility and in the process, take more and more of our freedom and potential for personal fulfillment.

Keith P. Hemingway, RA
Bristol, New Hampshire

The current economic crisis and stimulus efforts are a rare opportunity for us to take stock of our profession and chart new directions (or strengthen existing ones) for practice, policy, and pedagogy that truly make a difference. In many ways, the Summer 2009 issue of ArchitectureBoston foretells a path that architects and urban designers must follow in order to become even more impactful in the shaping of our cities and the critical challenges that we face.

Let me suggest a few guideposts for action. First, drawing inspiration from these excellent articles, asking difficult and pointed questions, is just as crucial as finding design solutions. Second, the issue suggests a re-examination of our values as architects and urban designers, including a turn toward humanist values, such as those outlined by Boston’s own Kevin Lynch in his masterpiece, Good City Form. Third is to develop a broader and more sophisticated sense of what design truly involves, including the design of long-term processes and consequential policies, as the articles suggest. Fourth, we can train future generations of architects and urban designers to be extremely open-minded and innovative (beyond just form and materials) through experimental and open-ended studios, critical examination of relationships between urban design and public policy, and learning through a deep understanding of international...
comparative urbanism, especially from some of the most resourceful and innovative cities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Finally, a self-critical and questioning attitude (rather than the postureing some star architects are prone to do) results in being open to change, to constant learning, and to continued innovation.

Aseem Inam PhD  
School of Architecture and Planning  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

For those of us who live outside Route 128, it’s been a long time since we believed that anyone outside of these cities cared enough to recognize the importance of these vital, regional hubs to our state’s future. The spotlight shed on their potential by a periodical with “Boston” in the title is significant and welcome.

As the former mayor of one of these cities, Fall River, I know that public attention and education is a crucial first step in building support for the necessary re-investment these cities need to thrive. These 11 outlying communities, with great histories that, at one time, saw them lead the world in a variety of industries, brought a richness to Massachusetts of culture and wealth. Although suburbanization and de-industrialization have brought new challenges for them to face, these cities have come together to make the case that they are not a special-interest group but, rather, a gateway to a new economic future in our state, providing livable neighborhoods where families can live and work and where the innovative spirit that once symbolized their collective enterprise can be present once again.

Greater Boston and everyone in the Commonwealth needs to care about what happens in these cities, in order to ensure balance in our state-wide economy and to support sustainability and prevent further sprawl. And the residents in the communities around these cities need to understand that their regional economies are dependent on the health of these cities.

Edward M. Lambert, Jr.  
The Urban Initiative  
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

Typically, large-scale visions for cities’ renewal focus wholly on the needs of adults — as if no toddlers, children, or youth walked the streets, or as if those young people would not inherit the streets and buildings being planned. So the “Greetings from MY City” project [Summer 2009] is a welcome change — as were the bold images of their city that the young photographers produced.

In developing a series of community cultural plans, we have asked young people to map the spaces in which they learn and create. The resulting maps and interviews reveal young people as sharp analysts of their neighborhoods and cities. They point out that few cities bother to build an infrastructure that supports the creativity of the next generation. They are equally clear about what would make a difference: safe, unstructured 24/7 spaces where they can do their work; housing with artist studios so they can learn from experts and mentors; public transportation that connects them to out-of-school learning opportunities; jobs where they can learn and earn; and an information architecture that would connect them to programs, scholarships, and work opportunities.

There is much talk of creating cities that rise, like Phoenixes, from the ashes, because they foster local innovation, artistry, and entrepreneurship. But in the end, this cannot only be about building arts districts or loft apartments or urban farms that attract new adult populations: it must also be about developing neighborhoods and activities that sustain the next generation of citizens who want and know how to invest in, inhabit, and enliven their communities.

Dennie Wolf  
WolfBrown  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

We want to hear from you. Letters may be e-mailed to epadjen@architects.org or sent to ArchitectureBoston, 52 Broad Street, Boston, MA 02109. Letters may be edited for clarity and length, and must include your name, address, and daytime telephone number. Length should not exceed 300 words.