

Urban design governance in low-density American Cities: emerging institutions in Kansas City, USA

Jason Brody¹, Samantha Estabrook

¹Kansas State University

Kansas City Design Center

jbrody@ksu.edu

Key Words: design governance, American cities, low-density cities, urban regeneration

This paper examines recent and halting efforts to develop institutions for design governance in Kansas City, a sprawling medium-sized city in the Midwestern United States.

Design governance refers to “second-order” (George 1997) methods of regulating urban design and development decisions. Public sector agencies employ design governance mechanisms to regulate the activity of private sector real estate developers to achieve a range of public goals connected to urban development. Less conventionally, design governance can also refer to methods of coordinating the design, development, management, and operations of elements of the public realm across multiple municipal departments. Research on design governance in North America has tended to focus on coastal cities with long traditions of design governance (Punter 1999, White 2015). Less studied are cities in the interior whose size, density, isolation, or conservatism limit the sustained development interest needed to make effective design governance possible. This paper uses the case of Kansas City to examine design governance in this more challenging context.

Kansas City is the 37th largest city and 29th largest metropolitan region in the United States. It is classified as a Gamma– city by the Globalization and World Cities Research Network. Kansas City’s extensive highway network – it has more miles of limited-access highway per capita than any other US region – has engendered a low-density urban form and led to several decades of disinvestment in its historic urban core. More recently, however, downtown Kansas City has experienced a revival,

including a lively arts scene and development of a new sports arena, entertainment district, performing arts center, and streetcar line. Downtown Kansas City's population has doubled over the last decade as these new amenities attract residents from suburban parts of the region. With 4,500 housing units planned and under construction the downtown population is expected to increase by another 50% over the next five years. After decades of decline Kansas City is experiencing a design moment, making it an opportune time to assess its nascent institutions for design governance.

This paper draws on content analysis of city plans and semi-structured interviews with public officials, developers and residents, supplemented by selected morphological analysis, to explore the development of design governance institutions in downtown Kansas City. I identify the mechanisms for design governance established in successive city plans, analyze how those mechanisms have been implemented within the current development context, and evaluate the successes and failures in attempts to increase the quality of urbanism in the downtown core.

Downtown Kansas City has experienced a significant resurgence, with a first phase beginning in 2003 and a second emerging after the 2008 financial crisis. Successive city plans have played an important role in guiding both phases of this resurgence and have identified mechanisms of design governance to ensure that new developments contribute to sustaining downtown Kansas City's momentum. Nevertheless, context and cultural factors limit the effectiveness of emerging institutions of design governance. Adoption of a new Parking and Transportation Committee has facilitated improvements in the organization of the public right of way, but inconsistent adherence to city plans across municipal agencies including the Department of Public Works have limited the effectiveness of adopted street guidelines. The long history of disinvestment in downtown has resulted in a culture of accommodation to developers: recent projects have continued to benefit from a range of public subsidies despite increasing interest and market demand for new downtown development. Other planning efforts have worked at the margins of design governance by attempting to build through education the public and private capacity to create value through good urban design. In low-density cities without longstanding traditions of

public sector urban design, these education and capacity-building efforts represent an important if limited element of effective design governance.

Works Cited:

George, R. Varkki. 1997. "A Procedural Explanation for Contemporary Urban Design" in *Journal of Urban Design*. 2, 2: 143-161.

Punter, John. 1999. *Design Guidelines in American Cities: A Review of Design Policies and Guidance in Five West Coast Cities*. Town Planning Review Special Study No. 2. Liverpool UK: University of Liverpool Press.

White, James. 2015. "Future Directions in Urban Design as Public Policy: reassessing Best Practice Principles for Design Review and Development Management" in *Journal of Urban Design*. 20, 3: 325-348.