

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

Peter Kageyama, Author, *For the Love of Cities: The Love Affair Between People and Their Places*

Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Peter Kageyama

For the Love of Cities: The Love Affair Between People and Their Places

Well, the core idea behind that is places, like children, pets, plants, objects, when they are loved, they are going to do better. And if we can figure out how to get more people emotionally engaged with the place that they live in than good things will flow from that: more social capital, more social engagement, more interesting projects, more social entrepreneurs, more investment, more commitment to our places. And all of that has this wonderful cyclical effect that people start feeling better about their place. They vote, they start volunteering, they maybe do more for their local business, they get involved in a different way. Because when we love something, we care for it. We go above and beyond ordinary definitions of citizenship, which frankly for most people, the relationship that they have with their cities is very functional. You know, 'I pay my taxes, I obey the law, I spend my money. In return the city provides me with its infrastructure.' And that's fine. That is your ordinary, day-to-day citizenship, but I think when we can start going beyond that and if we can get people a little more emotionally connected, emotionally engaged in their place, they're willing to do more.

Thinking about "infrastructure" in a different way

When people say the word infrastructure, they immediately think of things like roads, bridges, and stadiums. And that's very true. What I'm trying to get people to think about is their community on a different level; on an emotional level, and think about it in terms of this relationship that we actually have. So what I'd like to do is start to get people to think about infrastructure that supports that emotional component, to the relationship that we actually have with our cities. And when we start thinking about that, we start thinking beyond just the roads and bridges, and sort of that hardcore infrastructure; and we maybe get into a slightly more nuanced, and a little bit more interesting, discussion about infrastructure. Because these are the things that people probably respond to on a more emotional level.

Infrastructure: We Also Have A Failure to Communicate

I think we don't notice infrastructure until it fails. I think Bruce Mau points that out in his work, *Massive Change*. That it's all just invisible, we take it for granted until something either catastrophic or even minor, such as a pothole, now suddenly appears in our daily commute. So we have to start thinking about this stuff before either minor or catastrophic failure actually occurs. And that to me is really part of the challenge that certainly you guys are taking up and I think other people are taking up and trying to get people to invest in infrastructure. I think the whole conversation about this is an opportunity to get people back to work, rebuild America. I think that is part of that communications plan, but certainly it wouldn't be wrong to call it a communications crisis because not enough people are taking this stuff seriously.

Cities Are "It"

Within the last few years the UN has said that more than 50% of the world's population now lives in urban areas. By 2030, 2040, that's going to be up to 75%. So yes, cities are "it" whether people like it or not. Cities that are growing rapidly in parts of the world, they have all the worst characteristics of cities: sprawl, congestion, pollution, and environmental degradations so that's the downside of that. But at the same time you're seeing some cities are really embracing this new growth, this smart growth, and doing amazing things with transportation, with new levels of density that we never thought were possible before, with great design, and really bringing people together and making people realize how much they like being in fairly close proximity to each other. Because as human beings, we respond to other human beings and that's hard to do when we're out in the exurbs in our cars and the only interaction you maybe have with your neighbor is when you wave to them as you pull into your garage. That's not satisfying on a human level and I think people after a generation are realizing that, and that's certainly part of the reason why they are coming back to the cities, to have that interaction with their fellow human being.

Our Legacy and Taking Responsibility for the Built Environment

I think part of the problem is we have become a very disposable culture: We buy a new phone every couple years. We buy a new computer every 18 months. We change our TVs. We change our cars. We have this highly disposable mentality around stuff, even big stuff. I suppose that we tend to think of buildings as, 'well that's a new building and 10 years from now we'll knock that down, put something else up there.' But buildings actually last certainly longer than that and those ugly buildings that maybe people were putting up a generation ago, we're still paying the price for that. My friend Charles Landry likes to point out that ugliness has a price. That ugliness can carry through for decades and there is a social cost to that, just as there is a social benefit to a wonderfully designed building and a beautiful building. I think Jan Gehl was the one, the Danish

architect, who really started talking about that 25 years ago in *The Life Between Buildings*, making people realize it's the structure and how it plays into the environment it sits in as well. And it was this seamlessness that I thought was really wonderful and has continued in his work that frankly, at the time, most architects really weren't paying attention to that. Now they are.

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