Canberra, Australia's national capital, is a neat, tree-lined place with plenty of open space and parks, but it lacks a vibrant street culture.

HOWARD KOZLOFF

CLEAN

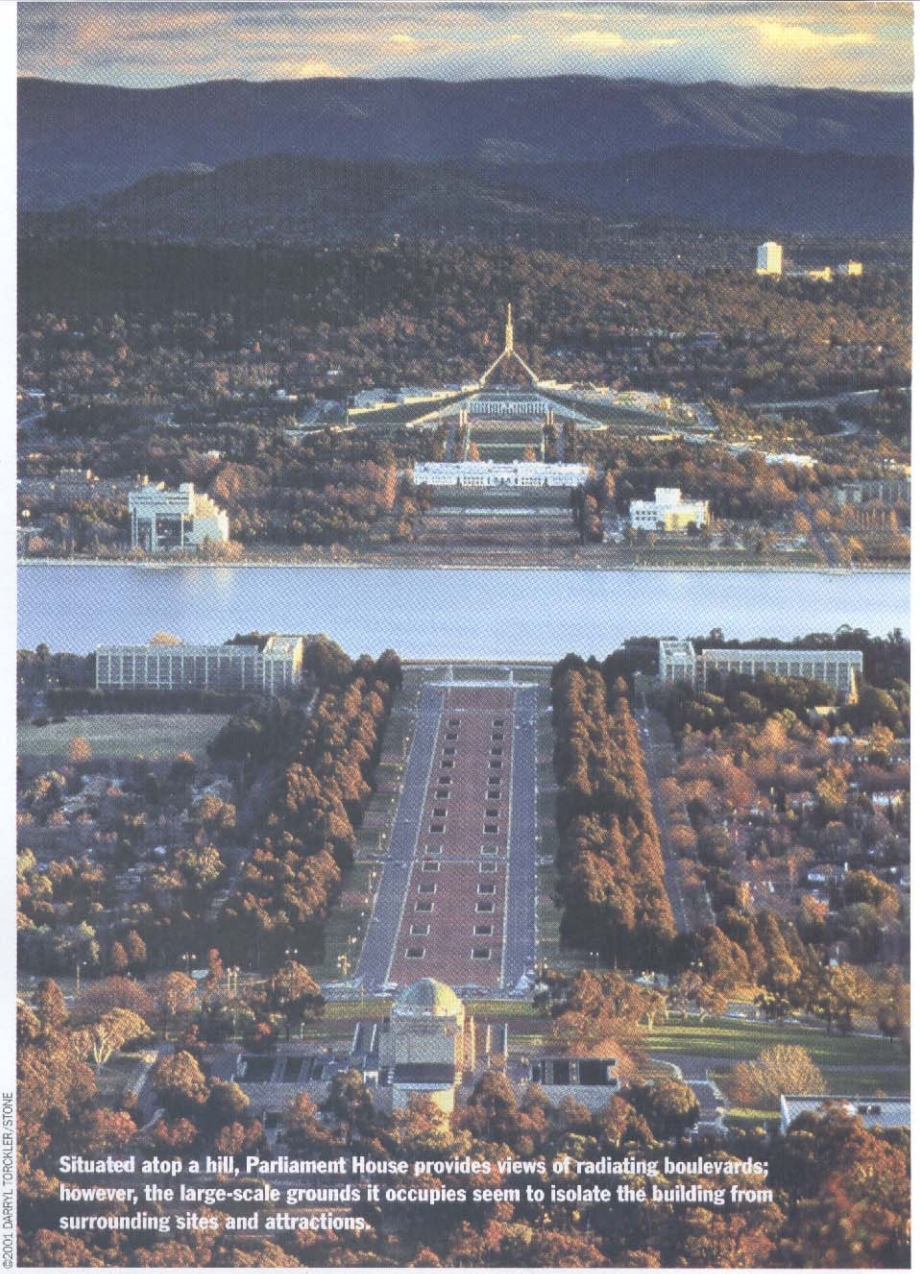
Place making is at the forefront of discussions in the intertwined worlds of development, planning, and architecture—yet, when it comes to actually creating places that draw community, few cities in the world have risen to the challenge. Most place making consists of inserting a relatively small built environment within, or adjacent to, a larger, more established context, or reworking an already existing part of the urban fabric. The full-scale, city-building ideas of Le Corbusier, Ebenezer Howard (who introduced the idea of Garden Cities), or Frank

SLATE

Lloyd Wright are barely visible as they were intended. Instead, portions of their ideas can be seen in parts of towns and cities, providing little or no proof of their successes or failures.

Washington, D.C., is America's closest example of a large-scale, master-planned city, having been conceived by Pierre L'Enfant in 1791 and developed at the turn of the 20th century. However, two international cities provide clear examples of what can be achieved—or lost—when an attempt is made to create a major urban center on empty land. Brasilia, the capital of Brazil, is one such example. Another is Canberra, the national capital of Australia. Having recently celebrated its centenary, Canberra provides a workable laboratory in which to examine the achievements, as well as the shortcomings, of one of the world's largest master-planned communities.

Sydney-based sociologist Jeff Zinsmeister likens the activity level in Canberra's city center to that of a university town when classes are not in session. "All the tools for a healthy, vibrant street culture are there—shops, restaurants, bars, museums, parks. What is lacking, however, is the glue that keeps all of these components together—people." With more than 300,000 people and a large number of tourists, there certainly is a pool to draw from. Yet, people do not flock to Canberra's urban amenities as their counterparts in cities such as Sydney, Melbourne, or even Washington, D.C., do.



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Situated atop a hill, Parliament House provides views of radiating boulevards; however, the large-scale grounds it occupies seem to isolate the building from surrounding sites and attractions.

One hundred years ago, those behind the creation of Canberra formed the Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors, and Members of Allied Professions, articulating from the outset their desire for a tabla rasa, or a clean slate: "It is important that the federal capital should be laid out in the most perfect manner possible, and . . . to avoid the mistakes made in many cities of spoiling the plan by using existing buildings, it is desirable that in any site obtained, all obstructions be removed that would in any way prevent the adoption of the most perfect design."

According to Robert Freestone, a professor of the built environment at the University of New South Wales, the story behind Canberra offers a history in microcosm of master-planned communities in Australia. The very idea of town planning in the country did not exist prior to plans to construct its national capital. "The federal capital was usually treated as the vehicle for generic theoretical advancements rather than the singular embodiment of national identity . . . . [T]he subtheme that underlies the events . . . is the development of a sense of a completely new profession called town planning," explains Freestone.

On January 1, 1901, the commonwealth of Australia was established when Queen Victoria of England signed the Constitution Act. A federal capital housing the national government was to be established on a site located within the state of New South Wales and at least 100 miles from Sydney. The initial site was to encompass a minimum of 100 acres. The capital was to be a "garden city" from the get-go, and after 23 proposals were evaluated, the Yass-Canberra area was selected to become the Australian Capital Territory in 1908.

In 1911, after a more specific site was determined, an international competition for a city plan was launched, attracting 137 entries. The winning plan was that of Walter Burley Griffin, a landscape architect from Chicago. His plan established a city for 25,000 people, which he expected would grow to 75,000. Burley Griffin's aim was to obtain unity by incorporating the geographic advantages of the area—its distant mountains, local hills, valleys, and waterways—into the plan. Lake Burley Griffin, a manmade lake created by damming the Molonglo River, and a "parliamentary triangle," which was to be formed by key national buildings, were the defining characteristics of Griffin's plan.

Progress in the development of Canberra was hindered by changes of government, financial shortfalls, and World War I. In addition,

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repeated efforts by various government officials to alter Burley Griffin's plans frustrated Griffin, prompting him to depart and leaving the completion of the city in the hands of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee, a government agency established in Canberra's early years to oversee progress, or—as was the case—lack of progress. Further delays occurred during the Great Depression and World War II.

Finally, in 1957, then–Prime Minister Robert Menzies established the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) "to create a capital city of which all Australians would be proud." As Canberra's Tourism office explains, "The Commission had a fourfold task: to complete the establishment of Canberra as the seat of government; to develop it fully as the administrative center; to create the buildings, avenues, lakes, parks, and other features appropriate to Australia's national capital; and to design living areas with a high standard of amenities and attractive surroundings."

In its present form, Canberra consists of two "urban" areas, Capital Hill and City Center, and surrounding residential areas. Capital Hill includes the parliamentary triangle, which comprises the major government buildings. City Center is essentially the downtown of Canberra. The NCDC was charged with developing these areas to create a national capital that would be, as architect George Sydney Jones said in 1901, "the most beautiful of the modern world."

Within its first 15 years, the NCDC completed a number of significant projects, including the Department of Defence, the Kings Avenue and Commonwealth Avenue bridges (connecting Capital Hill with City Center and making the creation of Lake Burley Griffin possible), a memorial boulevard named Anzac Parade, the Royal Australian Mint, the National Library, and the National Botanic Gardens. The early 1960s also saw the creation of significant office and retail space in and around City Center.

In addition, several national institutions, including the National Library of Australia, the National Gallery of Australia, the Australian National University, and the Academy of Science, established headquarters in Canberra to facilitate communication with the government.

Today, the National Capital Authority, the agency responsible for the planning and development of Canberra, is under the auspices of both the federal and Australian Capital Territory (ACT) governments. In 1988, the Australian Capital Territory Planning and Land Management Act was passed and the National Capital Plan established. The latter aims to "ensure that Canberra and the Territory are planned in accordance with their national significance."

As governmental departments and others began moving into their new workplaces, new residential areas in which to house employees became necessary. Instead of allowing higher densities or permitting sprawl, the NCDC decided to create satellite cities, termed "new towns," to the north and south of Capital Hill and City Center. The outcome desired was a garden city surrounded by new towns—a master-planned community surrounded by smaller master-planned communities.

At present, Canberra adheres to its initial policies of town planning and achieves its goal of place making. Invariably, Canberra is "a place," but the type of place raises questions about the appropriate scale and scope of place making in today's cities and towns.

The Capital Hill area's Parliament House was designed by the New York City firm

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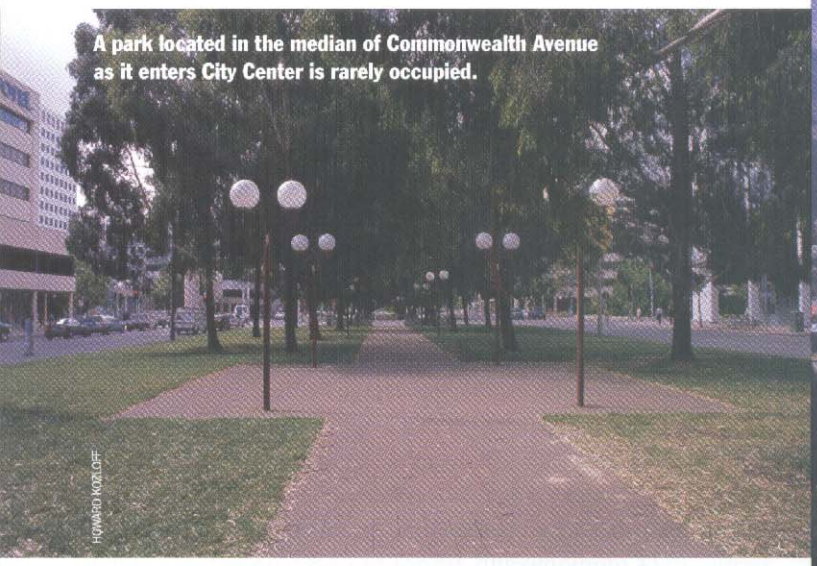
HOWARD KOZLOFF

The six-lane Commonwealth Avenue, a major arterial connecting City Center to Parliament House on Capital Hill, lacks a suitable pedestrian environment. Capital Hill, like Canberra as a whole, is designed for cars, which hinders the city's ability to foster an urban environment.



A park located in the median of Commonwealth Avenue as it enters City Center is rarely occupied.

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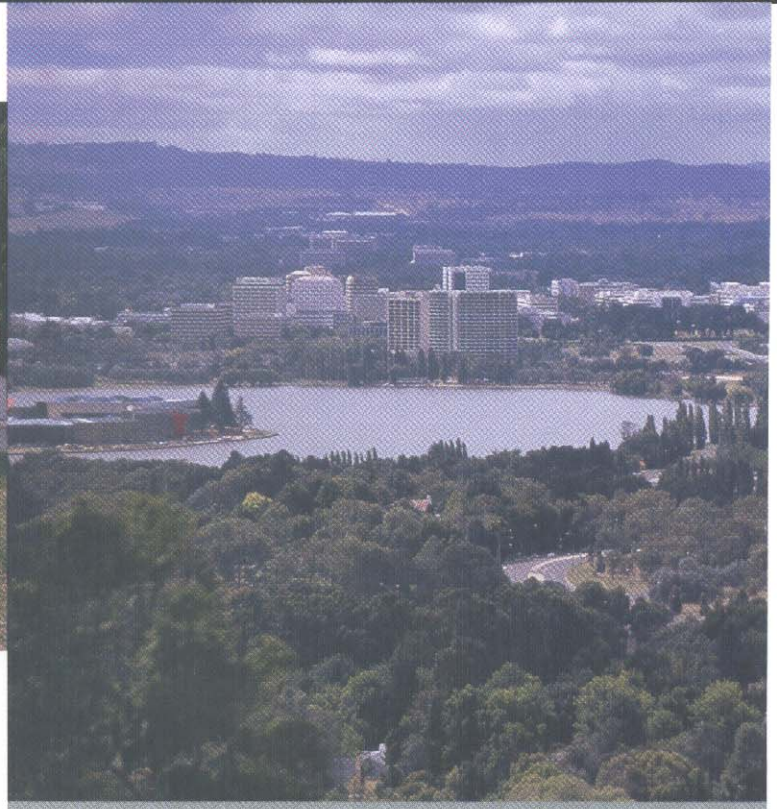


"ALL THE TOOLS FOR A HEALTHY, VIBRANT STREET CULTURE ARE THERE—SHOPS, RESTAURANTS, BARS, MUSEUMS, PARKS. WHAT IS LACKING, HOWEVER, IS THE GLUE THAT KEEPS ALL OF THESE COMPONENTS TOGETHER—PEOPLE."

Mitchell Giurgola in collaboration with Australian architect Richard Thorp. Situated atop a hill, Parliament House provides views of radiating boulevards and City Center beyond; however, the large-scale grounds it occupies seem to isolate the building from surrounding sites and attractions.

Comparisons to Washington, D.C., are inevitable. The U.S. Capitol has several significant buildings radiating from it, including museums and galleries, making the Mall, which runs between the Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial, a pleasant walking experience. Canberra, on the other hand, essentially has hidden its key buildings, (i.e., the National Gallery and National Library). Furthermore, the amenities inherent to urban environments, such as shops and restaurants, are visible but are not easily accessible—to walk to them would entail crossing Lake Burley Griffin via the Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, a thoroughfare with six lanes of relatively high-speed traffic offering only a narrow sidewalk for pedestrians.

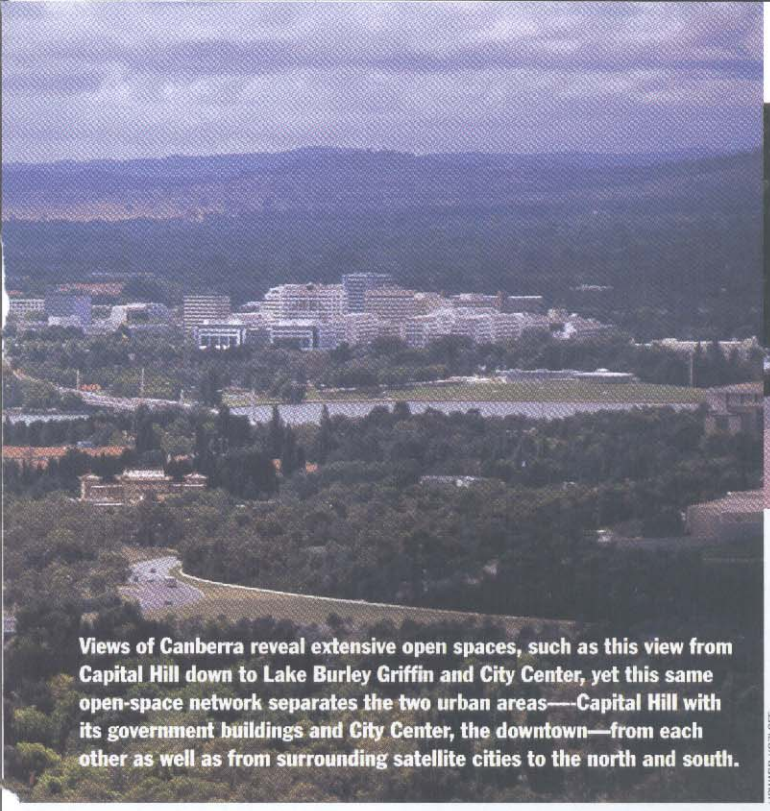
The area east of Canberra's Capital Hill contains some higher-density residential areas and hotels, as well as a small warehouse and industrial area. The apartment blocks stand in contrast—and rather unappealingly—to the single-family dwellings that dominate the Canberra area. Many of the area's parks are overgrown and not well cared for, and a lack of retail presence inhibits street activity there. Furthermore, reaching City Center is difficult because one has to cross the Kings Avenue Bridge, an experience not unlike that encountered with the Commonwealth Avenue Bridge.

West of Capital Hill, however, is an inviting area housing approximately 60 embassies that line curved and tree-lined streets. Most of the embassies and associated residences are built according to architectural styles of their respective countries. The U.S. embassy, for example, is a brick Colonial compound, whereas the Chinese embassy takes the form of a pagoda. Reaching the area by foot, however, is a daunting task, requiring pedestrians to cross the six- to eight-lane State Circle. Capital Hill, like Canberra as a whole, is designed for cars, which hinders the city's ability to foster an urban environment.

Despite the apparent lack of a truly active urban core in Canberra, a commercial center to complement the city's government functions undoubtedly was part of Burley Griffin's initial plan. North of Capital Hill, across Lake Burley Griffin, is the area of Canberra referred to as City Center. City Center has offices, shops, parks, a casino, and a central area of pedestrian-only streets with additional shops, restaurants, and bars, known as City Walk.

Immediately adjacent to City Center is the Australian National University, a decentralized campus of low- and mid-rise classrooms, offices, apartments, and townhouses not unlike some universities in the United States. However, despite its proximity to City Center, the lack of visible and clearly identifiable links makes the university seem disconnected from the City Center; the institution's presence is barely felt. Furthermore, the "visual separation" only augments the physical separation between Capital Hill and City Center. Except from the shores of Lake Burley Griffin, it is difficult—if not impossible—to glimpse Parliament House, despite its claim that it is the focal point of Canberra.

Perhaps one reason for such decentralization stems from the satellite towns—Woden, Weston Creek, Tuggeranong, and



Views of Canberra reveal extensive open spaces, such as this view from Capital Hill down to Lake Burley Griffin and City Center, yet this same open-space network separates the two urban areas—Capital Hill with its government buildings and City Center, the downtown—from each other as well as from surrounding satellite cities to the north and south.

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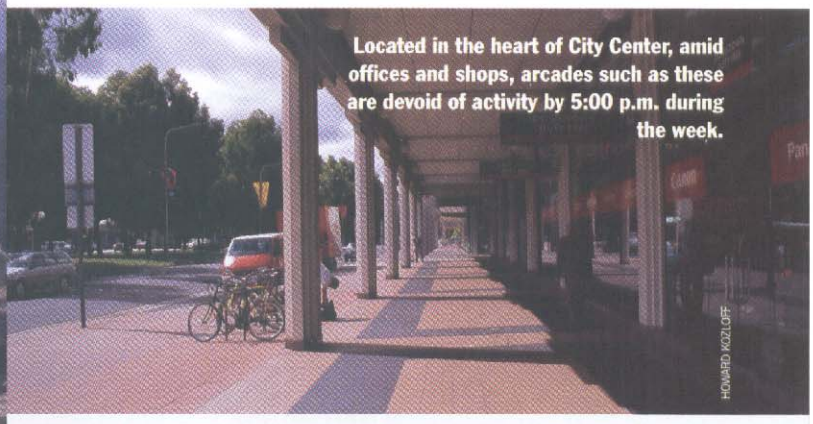

Located in the heart of City Center, amid offices and shops, arcades such as these are devoid of activity by 5:00 p.m. during the week.

HOWARD KOZLOFF

Gungahlin—that were part of the original plan and that still exist today. Each was to have its own town center and employment areas; instead, a series of subdivisions linked by wide roads all centered on a central mall has resulted.

The first new town, Woden, is about seven miles south of Civic Center. Weston Creek was created as an adjoining residential area and, therefore, the two areas often are referred to jointly as Woden–Weston Creek. Weston Creek is, in reality, a low-density subdivision of single-family houses; Woden contains a small number of higher-density residential areas, but it, too, has a large shopping mall at its center. Although there are a few office towers, there is a glaring absence of a pedestrian-oriented town center. Instead, the town's focal point seems to be the multilevel parking structures surrounding the mall.

Homes in Tuggeranong, located south of Woden–Weston Creek, also are in low-density, single-family neighborhoods. Community recreation centers and sports complexes lie at one end of town. The center of town, also dominated by a series of malls and shopping centers, has a main street lined with impersonal entrances, which are served by large parking garages located behind the retail space. Although a town center exists, it is automobile oriented and encourages little street activity.

Gungahlin, the fourth new town, is north of City Center and, like Weston Creek, is really a suburban subdivision. Belconnen, another area north of City Center, however, comes closest to achieving the goals of the original satellite cities. It includes some higher-density housing at the center of town, surrounded with single-family residences. Adjacent to a public library is a small pedestrian area, which was intended to serve as a civic gathering place. However, the small plaza leads directly to yet another shopping mall with its own parking structure, thereby siphoning pedestrians from the street.

A large and extensive open-space network runs among and between the satellite towns City Center and Capital Hill. Canberra has been called the "bush capital," referring to the fact that more than half of the city's land is designated as national park or reserve and reaches almost to City Center. The quality of Canberra's open space is perhaps the main reason for the disconnect between City Center and Capital Hill. It is both advisable and preferable to have significant open-space networks. However, the vast open-space network complicates journeys by foot from point A to point B, rather than serving to unify parts of Canberra and its suburbs.

To help counter this, an extensive public bus network, called the Action system, serves Capital Hill, City Center, and the suburbs relatively efficiently, although the system often seems to run with empty buses. In an attempt to apply the tenets of the City Beautiful movement to Canberra, large boulevards were created as the major arterials into and through the city. These boulevards, six to eight lanes wide and providing access to parking garages, are the preferred travel routes of most local residents in their private automobiles. This problem certainly is not endemic to Canberra; cities everywhere are trying to encourage public transit use. What differs, however, is that Canberra's traffic problems are not as dire as those in other places; the cavernous streets of the Australian capital rarely run at full capacity.

When considered as a whole, Canberra's initial vision became reality. However, the intended urbanity is hindered by the tools that were supposed to enable it—the street network, single-family subdivisions, satellite towns without significant employment centers, and an open-space network that inhibits pedestrian activity.

One century after its inception and 90 years after the formalization of the vision for the city, Canberra is a tidy, tree-lined place with plenty of open space and parks. What Canberra lacks, however, is the vibrant street culture—an eclectic mix of people of different ages, backgrounds, and socioeconomic levels socializing and interacting on city streets—associated with the complexity and character of most cities. Canberra can be viewed as Australia's equivalent of decentralized urban areas that Americans know so well; the area also affords numerous examples of what Australians are growing ever more accustomed to: the suburban subdivision. Canberra seemingly has taken the notion of private lots, driveways, and cookie-cutter houses and made a city out of it. ■

Howard Kozloff currently is in Sydney studying the Olympic planning process as a Frank Knox Traveling Fellow from Harvard University.

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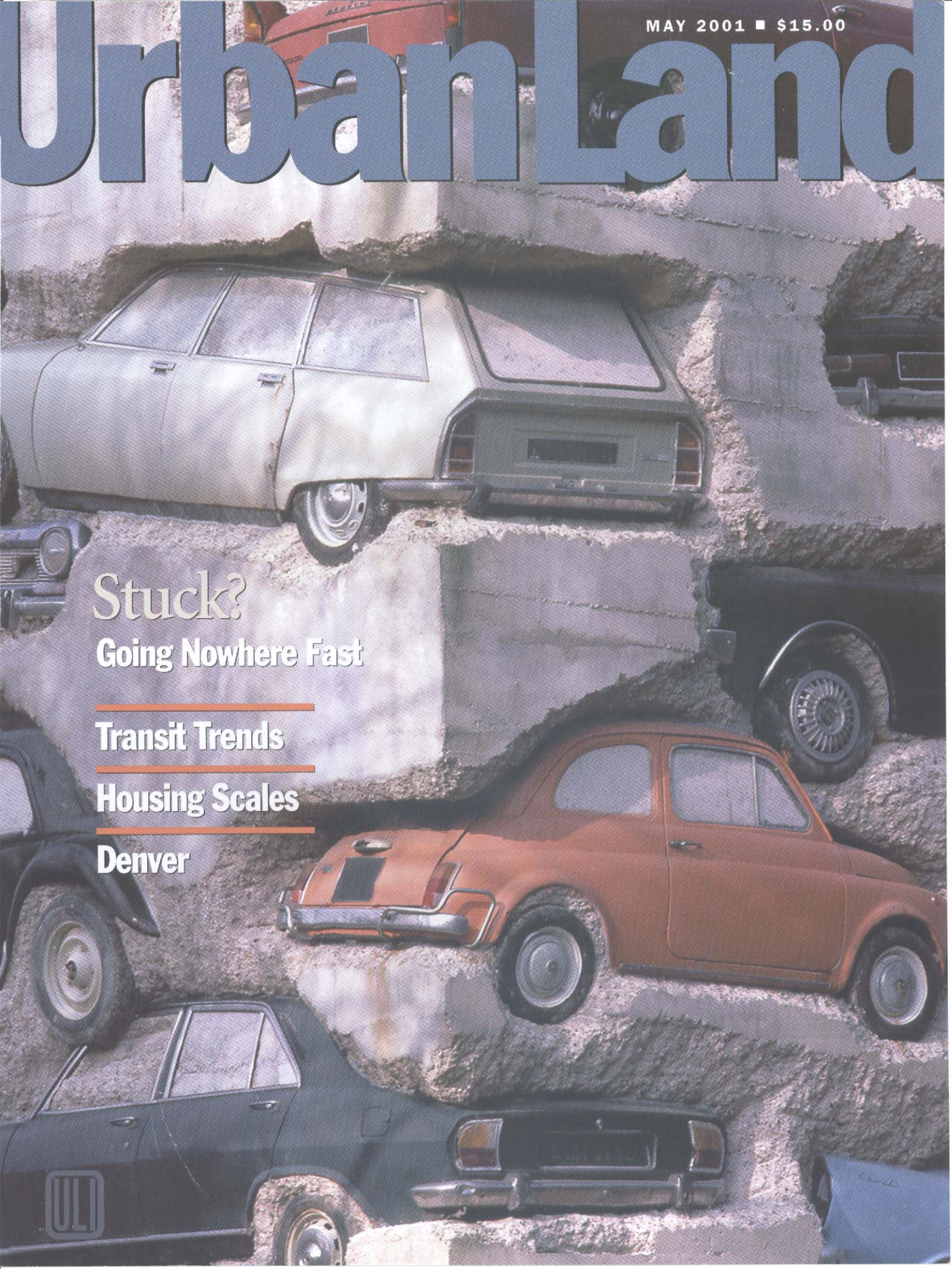
Urban Land



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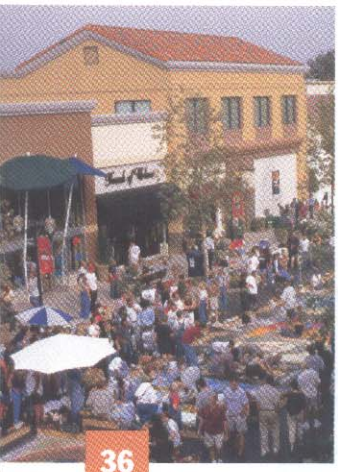

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Full places.

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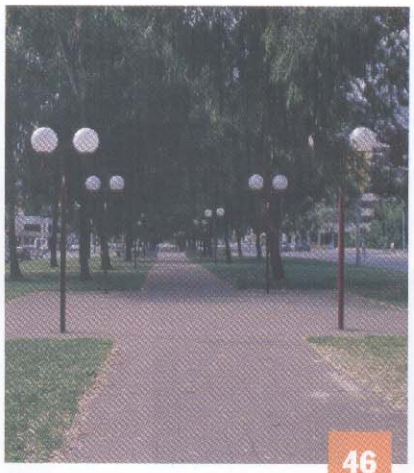

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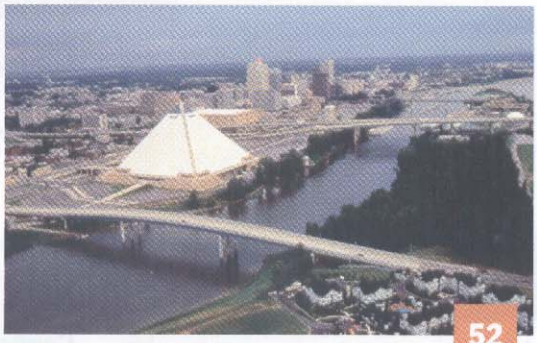

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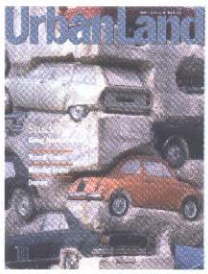

ON THE COVER:
Mass transit.
(See pages 68, 79, and 84.)

Sculpture: Compression, by Cesar
Photo: © Michael Freeman/CORBIS

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