

An Argument for a Change in Approach to Visual Communication in Urban
Development Projects

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfillment of the examination for the BA Honours Animation. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Your name

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Abstract

In the world of urban development and community planning today, communication is paramount. Whether it's communication with developers, policy-makers, or the wider community that urban-development projects intend to improve; lackluster or uninspiring communication strategies can be a deathblow to a project. Current visual communication prioritizes technical audiences, (developers, agencies, investors) instead of prioritizing public engagement. A method shift towards illustration and animation enables a type of communication that inspires creativity in the local population and creates goodwill through positive mental connections to other non-developer work, such as beloved movies or tv-shows. There is a vast array of public facing work done in the world today that relies purely on either good will or data-sheets to curry positive public sentiment, and much bad car-centric and anti-human urbanism that spreads un-abated because of the indifference and lacking-interest of the public. There is a vast un-tapped well of creative practices and talent that can be used to better these practices and create a tighter knot into the communities served.

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Introduction

In today's world of urban development and community planning, communication is paramount. Whether it's communication with developers, policy-makers, or the wider community that urban-development projects intend to improve, lackluster or uninspiring communication strategies can be a deathblow to a project. An urban development project is the brainchild of a private business seeking to transform an existing or new space for commercial gain, or of a public government agency aiming to create a shared space that often combines the disciplines of transportation, housing, parks, and other community amenities. The job of professionals working in these fields is not just to create the streetscape, building, or park, but also to sell the idea and details to stakeholders to secure the proper funding and permissions to see the project through to completion. Campaigns that have not taken the time to make themselves understood, or that misunderstand their audience's needs and concerns, can result in projects that have taken years and millions of Dollars/Euros in planning being delayed, or, worse, failing to move into the implementation phase.

A microscope can be pointed especially at visual communication as a missed opportunity to sell the project's vision. Through architectural and economic diagrams, detailed spreadsheets, and long narratives, projects often prioritise the informational needs of those who have the most obvious power over the future of a given development. Less consideration, however, is often given to the people these projects often affect most. 3D renderings and collages may give a general audience some idea of a project's goals, but they fail to inspire public support in a population fatigued by the promises and lackluster results delivered by modern development projects. Current visual communication on these public and private works often fails to appeal to the audience most important to their success; the citizenry, or rather, the public at large. As we take the next steps into an era of urbanism defined by the works of Jane Jacobs and by organizations such as Strong Towns, a more conceptual and fantastic approach to visual communication can lead to more support and interest in these projects that are set to make our cities safer, cleaner, and more livable.

As urban development projects continue to face skepticism and opposition from concerned communities, a focus on visual communication, combined with urbanist/Jacobsonian principles, can foster a more positive, proactive community base that shows support. We can find successful approaches to visual communication through illustration and animation. Most visual communication in modern urbanist projects relies on two main methods: collage pieces featuring photographs of real people superimposed upon 3D renderings of architectural designs, and architectural and G.I.S. (geographic information systems) diagrams. These two methods convey separate but equally useful information. Renderings are used to convey a

conceptual image of the project after completion and habitation, allowing the audience to place themselves in the completed space, often at street level. Diagrams are used to convey concrete information about a project, such as zoning, structural, or component location and use. While both aspects are important, the shift towards illustrative approaches is evident in the use of conceptual imagery. An illustrative approach allows for greater creative liberty, leading to greater visual interest and a positive interpretation for the audience, outlined as most important yet least prioritized: the general public.

To outline this approach, it is important to start with a rundown of Jane Jacobs's work and ideas, as well as a breakdown of the Strong Towns framework as outlined by Charles Marohn. Jacobs' and Marohn's ideas are paramount to understanding modern urban planning, and through their work, a baseline for what qualifies as a true urbanist project is established. This is what will be explored in the first chapter, along with a further outline of advocacy actions undertaken by Strong Towns and other urbanism promoters, both in person and online. Following this exploration of advocacy, the second chapter will focus on the failures of current communication practices and where missteps often occur in urban planning approaches. Using the Portland, Oregon Broadway Corridor / USPS site master plan as a case study to explore the different methods of communication found within master-plan documents, and in the process laying out a groundwork for a structured analysis. The third chapter of this paper will use the knowledge and background established in the earlier chapters and the introduction to explore methods for implementing a more illustrative or animated approach to visual communication for all audiences, the desired outcome of this approach, and how it can be achieved. This paper argues that urban development projects systematically underserve their most critical audience by relying on imagery and communication that target solely professional stakeholders, as seen in the Portland examples in chapters 2 and 3. With a focus on projects aligned with the principles of Jane Jacobs and Charles Marohn, this paper proposes a shift toward illustration and animation as the primary tools of visual communication, as such projects will garner broader support and generate positive public engagement in efforts to construct more livable cities.

Ch. 1: Jacobs, Strong Towns framework, and challenges in communication.

The "Strong Towns Approach" to city planning (Marohn 13), as coined by Charles Marohn in his 2019 book *Strong Towns: A Bottom-Up Revolution to Rebuild American Prosperity*, is a method of city-planning that places importance on infill development and is in opposition to the ideology of car-centric urban design popular during the late 20th and early

21st century. The primary aspects of this approach to urban design are dense living, mixed-use development, pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly infrastructure, and forward-looking street design. Dense living and mixed-use development in this context does not exclusively mean skyscrapers and mega-blocks; it most often entails three to five-story apartment blocks placed without setback to the street, and spaces for storefronts and office space on the first floor. The goal of this type of development is to create what has been popularly coined the “15-minute city” (Freyne), a community where people live within comfortable walking or transit distance of all their needs, such as groceries, restaurants, or general stores. While Strong Towns is the most popular advocacy group in the United States working towards these goals, it is not the originator. That honor would go to the New York activist and journalist Jane Jacobs.

It is impossible to speak of urban planning in North America without recognizing the impact of Jane Jacobs and her ideas on urban form and the function of neighborhoods within cities. The modern discourse on urban planning is shaped by the ideas and arguments laid out by Jacobs during her most active years in the early 1960’s. She spent this era advocating against highway policy in the United States and speaking openly in opposition to the ideas and practices of then New York City Commissioner of Parks & Recreation and early-20th-century urban planner Robert Moses. It is because of her immense influence and my admiration for her work that I have chosen to begin this thesis by outlining her ideas and explaining their context.

Jacobs’s most prominent and cited work is her 1961 book *The Life and Death of Great American Cities*. Jacobs states in the opening lines of the Introduction that her book “is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding” (Jacobs 3). The city planning and rebuilding that she spoke of consisted mostly of large-scale demolitions of old historic districts of major American cities to make way for large highways, class-segregated public housing towers, sprawling suburbs, and shopping malls surrounded by moats of parking lots. One case study she focuses on in *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* is the North End of Boston, a neighborhood Jacobs describes as “it embodies attributes which all enlightened people know are evil, because so many wise men say they are evil” (Jacobs 8). The North End, pictured on the postcard in Figure 001, was, and remains, pushed against industrial zones, mingling multiple uses such as commerce and residential together, and contains some of the highest dwelling units per mile in the US. These features are all aspects that Jacobs says “in orthodox planning terms, it is a three-dimensional textbook of megalopolis in the last stages of depravity” (Jacobs 8). The neighborhood was often a target of local architectural school assignments, often concluding that they should bulldoze the entire district, as had happened in many neighborhoods in New York, and replace the dense neighborhood with large project towers interspersed with abundant park spaces and large

“Superblocks”. However, when she visited in 1959, did not believe that the true character of the neighborhood matched its reputation as blighted and downtrodden.



Fig. 001 “North End and Boston Navy Yards” Postcard circa. 1950’s (Wikipedia Commons)

“I looked down a narrow alley, thinking to find at least here the old squalled North End, but no, more neatly repointed brick work – and a burst of music as a door opened. – the streets were alive with children playing, people shopping, people strolling, people talking – I had seen a lot of Boston in the last couple of days, most of it sorely distressing and this struck me with relief as the healthiest place in the city” (Jacobs 9). Jacobs was shocked to find funding from the city had not been funneled into the neighborhood to make it so vibrant and lively. The North End was “red-lined”, making it nearly impossible to source mortgages or any type of business loans. She found through her research that improvements to structures and livability had been funded by pooling local resources and that renovations had been carried out through bartering among neighbors. Local planners in Boston and the federal government had the North End marked for demolition, labeling it a slum, yet it was arguably the most livable neighborhood in the whole city. Luckily, the North End was not demolished and remains one of Boston's most desirable neighborhoods today. The same cannot be said for its sister neighborhood, the West End. In 1959, the West End was flattened to make way for high-rise towers and car-friendly living, erasing the lively, mostly immigrant community that once called the place home.

While Robert Moses did not have a direct hand in the planning of Boston’s urban renewal projects, they were unquestionably inspired by his work overseeing similar projects

across New York City. Jacobs, through first-hand examples such as Boston and New York, argues that the projects planned and proposed by figures such as Robert Moses and others in his school of thought led to decaying cities that served cars rather than people. These new urban areas left people's lives segregated into districts, with living, working, and shopping each in its own designated zone, resulting in clogged traffic and isolation from daily needs. This segregation of resources also left these neighborhoods deserted at different times of day, creating the perfect opportunity for crime. Jacobs proposes, in contrast to these developments, that neighborhoods should actually strive for aspects that planners such as Moses would consider undesirable, such as density, mixed uses, and the preservation of historical architecture. A dedication to these ideas, she argues, would lead to healthier, more vibrant, and safer cities where communities can lift each other up and thrive.

Jacobs' ideas and influence have become a central tenet of popular urban planning discourse in the United States today. Though her influence has grown and her ideas have become popular in academic curricula, they still struggle to permeate the actual urban fabric of our cities. We can begin to see her influence in the decades following her publications in the rise of urbanist policies, such as the expansion of bike, transit, and pedestrian infrastructure (Maus), and in the pushback and cancellation of highway projects in many American cities. A new generation continues to advance Jacobs' ideas in a modern context through organizations such as Strong Towns, founded by Charles Marohn and named after his 2019 book, *Strong Towns: A Bottom-Up Revolution to Rebuild American Prosperity*. As Strong Towns is the most prominent and well-known group fighting for this form of Jane Jacobs-esque change in the US and abroad, I will use it as the main example of organized urbanist advocacy. Strong Towns is a non-profit organization committed to the development of healthy and safe communities around the US, based on the principles of Jane Jacobs. Strong Towns' main focus is on community engagement, hosting town halls and meet-and-greets in cities across the U.S. and Canada. As outlined on their website, these groups aim to drive government policy through public organizing and advocacy. For example, on the page *Local Conversations*, it is stated: "These groups become the *on-the-ground advocates* who can work with local governments to implement Strong Towns principles." ("Local Conversations")

This "bottom-up" approach, preached by both Jacobs and coined by Marohn in the title and closing words of his book (Marohn 209), is in obvious ways a strategic move, meant to excite and rally those who might not be politically active before, into contacting their local councilors or officials to push for urbanist change in their communities. However, this approach is not simply one formed through the machinations of political strategy, but crafted naturally from the very essence of the movement. Marohn outlines in his book how the physical layout of a city is fundamental to forming the "invisible glue that holds communities

together” (Marohn 11), such as the connections one would make at a local bar or cafe, or even while taking the bus. These connections, over time, slowly intertwine the people of a place into a group that can work in each other's interests. This focus on community building and communal action leads to a movement that puts the people on the ground first and their connections to their community at the forefront. These values run counter to the political methods of 20th-century planners with whom Jacobs clashed so often. As Marohn describes in his book, those very planners often envisioned cities and neighborhoods as large master plans built from the top down, rather than the community-focused lead methods he proposed. As Marohn outlines, “None of these projects were the result of a master plan, the formal process cities go through to envision change. Instead, these quick and responsive hacks create changes that can actually be experienced – not just imagined – by the people they impact, a way more powerful approach to making change.” (Marohn 154)

Strong Towns’s methods of outreach focus mainly on their *Local Conversations* groups and through their podcasts, social media, and website. Strong Towns' influence has expanded far and wide throughout the urban planning sphere and is widely cited in most urbanist and academic circles. While Strong Towns approach of slow-but-steady out-reach and advocacy focused on local officials and community first organizing has had its successes, such as winning efforts to get rid of parking mandates in my home city of Portland, Oregon (Herriges) (Jordan) as well as multiple street safety improvement efforts in Connecticut, Minnesota, and Oregon (“New Resources Helps”)(“Portland Advocates Defend”)(Riley)(“After Years of Crashes”). Questions can be raised about its effectiveness in pushing larger-scale social and political reforms. As both Jacobs and Marohn found in their work, places and communities are meant to be formed by the people who live in them; it is only in the post WorldWar II world that we find our cities and towns structured not by the needs of their people but by the whims of powerbrokers. To create meaningful, long-lasting generational change in the urban fabric, these ideas must reach a broader audience of everyday people who would not otherwise connect their lived experiences to the banal planning and development processes of the places they live.

While Strong Towns manages a healthy online presence, with 179,000 subscribers to their YouTube channel and 118,000 followers on Instagram, it does not command the same scale of audience as many other urbanist-focused online “content creators”. Some examples of creators in this realm are *Not Just Bikes* (1.43 million YouTube subscribers), *City Beautiful* (737,000 subscribers), and former urban planning consultant to the City of Portland, Ray Delhanty (CityNerd), with 397,000 subscribers. All of these channels consistently reach larger audiences while preaching the same principles as Strong Towns and, especially, Jacobs. A major difference between these groups is that while all seek to inform and educate, independent content creators' secondary or even primary goal is to entertain and keep

audiences engaged. While this is primarily due to YouTube's monetary incentives for viewer performance, it has led many who would not otherwise care about urbanist educational material or urbanist projects to take an interest and deepen their knowledge of international, national, and local developments. This creative freedom and focus on wider audience appeal and retention have led to the successful spread of urbanist ideals across the internet, and such methods should be considered when planning outreach for future and current urbanist projects.

This paper examines whether illustrative and entertainment-driven communication strategies can inform the visual communication of ongoing and future urban development projects and lead to a more engaged and supportive audience, facilitating the easier achievement of project goals.

Ch. 2: Analyzing Visual Communication and the Broadway Corridor / USPS Master Plan.

Section 2.1: Establishing the analytical framework

A recent example of large-scale urban change in my hometown of Portland, Oregon, is the redevelopment of the former United States Postal Service central processing campus. The project has been in the works for the better part of two decades, but did not get underway until the city's purchase of the land from USPS in 2016. The facility itself remained on the lot until it was demolished section by section from mid-2020 through the end of 2023. The project, run by Downtown Portland's economic development non-profit Prosper Portland and the Portland Housing Bureau, describes itself on its website as "a key opportunity site for high-density employment, mixed-income housing, and signature city attractions and amenities. This project will connect the Old Town/Chinatown and Pearl District neighborhoods, with the goal to maximize community benefits, particularly to those groups that haven't benefited from other urban projects" ("About"). These goals are well within those outlined by Jacobs and Marohn, with a focus on mixed-use development and bringing back high-density living to the city core; it will be a welcome improvement to the city as a whole. Though as the project continues to develop, there is limited fanfare or excitement among city residents or business leaders. While the main goals of bringing energy and people back into this portion of the city cannot be realised until the project is completed, there is pessimism around the project and others like it. The USPS site is often referenced alongside previous underwhelming development projects in Portland and across the West Coast, which overshadows the potential positive outcomes this project seeks to deliver. While the state of

previous projects is in part to blame, there is also a point to be made that the city and its partners involved have not done a satisfactory job in trying to inspire a vision for this project outside of harkening back to previous successful projects, such as the Pearl District re-development project that took place just next to the USPS site throughout the 2000's and 2010's.

Section 2.2: USPS master plan / Broadway Corridor example

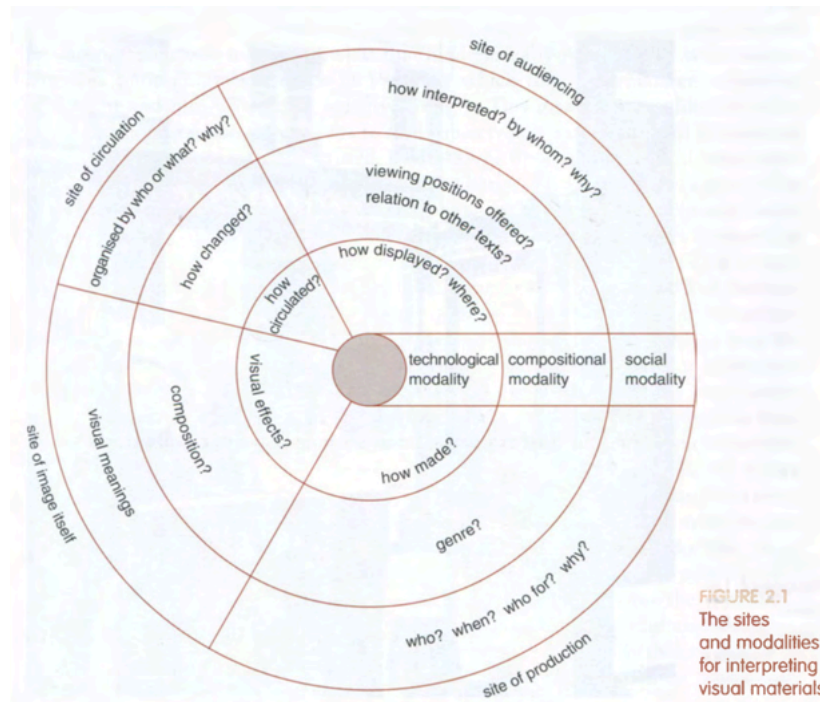


Fig 002. Page 25 of "Visual Methodologies - An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials 4th Edition"
Gillian Rose, 2016

The city's main comprehensive document on the USPS project is a 62-page document titled the USPS Master Plan, available on the Broadway Corridor Project's website and Prosper Portland's website.

To break down this document, I will use Gillian Rose's four *sites* of Visual Methodology (Figure 002). Rose states that there are four "*sites*" (Rose 24) that can be called upon when interpreting visual media. The first *site* Rose identifies is the *site* of production. This *site* encompasses the questions of who, where, when, and why a given visual image was produced, as well as the genre it falls under and the method of its construction. To begin, I'll ask the "who" of the document. We can conclude that this document was made by Prosper Portland in collaboration with ZGF Architects LLP, an Oregon-based architecture firm. This collaboration with an architectural design firm is important as it will help contextualize the visual content in the document. In terms of the where and when, the office locations of both

organizations listed in the document are in downtown Portland, near the project's location, and the document was published on August 20, 2020. I note *modalities* that show the creators of this project were familiar with the subject matter and the local audience they would be appealing to, and that they set a precedent for later references to Rose's four sites and all of their *modalities*.

I consider 'why' to be the most important question posed by Rose when analyzing this document. The document addresses a multitude of whys, as it appeals to a multitude of audiences and contains a varied array of genres and image types. Therefore, I will delve into the *site* of the image and the *site* of audiencing. The *site* of the image includes everything the actual product contains: all imagery, text, and anything else in the document. The *site* of audiencing is where the product is received, and more specifically, by whom. The *site* also includes how the product is interpreted or received by an audience, which is important regarding public works projects such as these. I have identified four distinct components of communication in this document, each offering its own answer to the question of why. I will use these components as a framework to analyze two Portland-based projects, demonstrating the functions and outcomes of current visual communication and how they can be improved.

These components are: *Conceptual Imagery*, comprising images from several genres, including architectural concept pieces and street-level collages varying in levels of realism. *Diagrams*, consisting of architectural, traffic, transit, and GIS mapping. *Text-Based Information* is the most varied component, as it encompasses all the text in the document, except for the following fourth component. The last component is *Law-Jargon*: references to

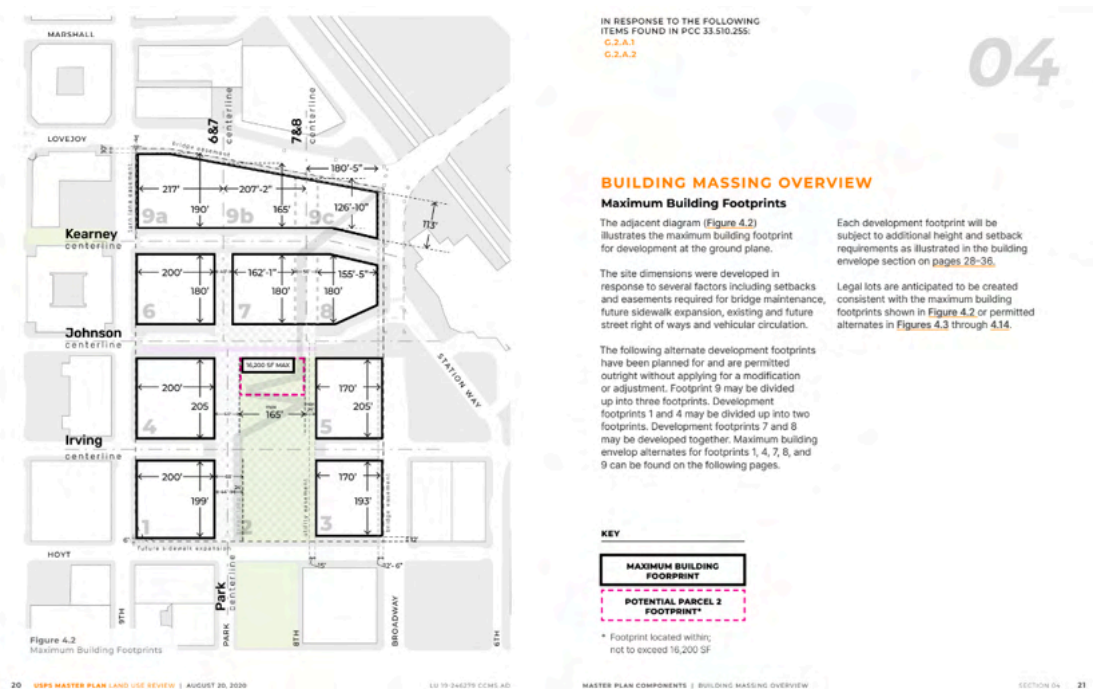


Fig 003. Page 21 of "USPS Master Plan" August 20th, 2020

titles and conditions set out by the circle of agencies and organizations with stakes in the project, and how it will meet them. This component comprises all the parts of the project that must adhere to very specific guidelines and parameters to meet the requirements it is bound by law to meet. All of these components lie within the image itself, with the whys of each answered through the *site* of audiencing. The last component, law-jargon, is an excellent example of this dynamic. The presence of the law-jargon in this document is intended to show a specific interested party and a specific audience that all legal and prior-agreed-upon boxes are checked and accounted for, and that the project is following all assigned guidelines. Another interested party or audience would be local developers and firms. This project needs outside developers to put down capital and buy these plots from the city to develop the buildings that will make up the majority of the new development.

Most images in the document fall under the diagrams component and are intended to show developers what is possible in terms of real-estate creation within the project's boundaries. On the page shown in Figure 003, taken from the document, there is an example of an architectural diagram component in a plan document. While some consideration is given to visual interest, the main purpose and takeaway from the image is the structural and zoning information given within. The need to appeal to the audience of agencies and developers can be explained by the fact that none of the construction, other than public works (e.g., water, roads, electricity), will be built by the city itself. Only one building is currently under construction: a middle-income housing development developed by Related Northwest, a branch of the real-estate firm Related California, which focuses on affordable housing developments. The building, located on Parcel 6 (second from the top, on the left end of the diagram above), is also being funded with a \$1 million loan from Prosper Portland to cover early development costs. This money comes from a 33.5 million USD award from the Portland Clean Energy Fund (Dorsey). This example shows that, while the city can provide partial funding for these projects to encourage development, the large amounts of capital needed for construction cannot be sourced internally. This is *why* the two components of diagrams and law-jargon exist: to appeal to external developers and investors. It is from here that we can ask: to what end is the appeal of visual media and conceptual imagery within this document, if the requirements of developers and bureaucrats are met? That is where we can find our secondary *site* of audiencing, a group I'll simply refer to as the general public. This includes but is not limited to the general population affected by these public works, as well as advocacy groups and neighborhood associations. I refer to this audience as secondary because that is often how documents such as these, including this project proposal, treat this group at the *site* of production. We can tell this from the ratio of law-jargon and architectural diagrams to conceptual imagery. Of the approximately 113 images in the USPS document, only 5 or 6 are conceptual imagery, and of those, only one truly succeeds, through its composition, in

guiding the audience to place themselves in the finished proposal. A general audience may have an understanding of architecture and local law, but their opinion is not swayed by adherence to code or to dimension. Their draw lies in our two other components, conceptual imagery and text-based information, though primarily in the former. It is important to consider the opinions of the general public when communicating about housing and infrastructure projects such as this one, for self-evident reasons; though I will draw on an example from San Francisco for further clarity.

Housing projects across the world have been cancelled or hindered due to public and local outrage for a wide variety of reasons, from concerns of gentrification, the potential change in the character of a given neighborhood, or racist fears of minorities or lower-status individuals moving into upper-class or majority-white neighborhoods. Local fears of change have consistently hindered development, both public and private, across almost every city in the world. San Francisco and the wider Bay Area are a modern and egregious example. A sought-after and expensive area of the city at the tip of the San Francisco Peninsula overlooking the Pacific shore is the Sunset District. The neighborhood is currently composed solely of low-rise single-family homes, contributing to the growing crunch in the housing supply as demand for dense multi-family housing continues to rise. A recently proposed 50-story housing development in the neighborhood (Nguyen) was quickly rejected by the local council and met with local opposition. The plan was subsequently re-proposed as a 24-story housing complex and still faces massive opposition and is being stalled by local committees (Sooji). Without strong public support in the modern political eco-system of urban development, many projects, such as the Sunset towers, can end up dead in the water.

What can we do to engage the public and get their support for the housing and infrastructure projects that our cities need to survive and thrive? The traditional way of thinking would encourage a push for more parking spaces and questionable promises of a percentage of affordable units. While I don't mean to say that there is no point in price caps and affordable units, as they have been forced into viability by the current disaster that is our global housing crisis. I believe that one relevant path for USPS Master Plan document and to many documents like it, is a more caring and focused attention to the way we use visual media to communicate projects to the general public, that is to say how we utilize the component of conceptual imagery and to a lesser extent text-based information to achieve greater support and positive feelings towards vital projects in our cities.



Fig 004. Page 7 of "USPS Master Plan" August 20th, 2020

Looking back at the USPS Master Plan document, we find the conceptual imagery I spoke of earlier in the chapter. I will use it as a starting point to discuss the fundamentals of successful conceptual imagery and what this image and the document as a whole could do differently. The colorful, detailed image is the main piece of conceptual imagery used in the document, appearing three times to show a finished idea of what the neighborhood in the completed project could look like. It attempts to immerse the audience in the project by placing the viewing perspective at eye level amid an active crowd. The angle encourages viewers to insert themselves into the finished neighborhood and imagine what benefits it would bring them and their community. The image conveys the intended atmosphere of the neighborhood by using greens, golds, and blues to create an earthy, natural aesthetic that appeals to Oregonians' love of the outdoors and nature. Color is also used to make the image feel lively and energetic, with saturated reds and oranges used around the restaurants. The image also shows a variety of land uses in the district, highlighting the potential for high-traffic businesses and high-demand housing, both of which are optimal income streams for those footing the bill for construction. This is an example of good engagement through conceptual imagery; the image itself does not provide much information about what one would need for construction or legal viability, but it allows a more general audience to place themselves within the bustling atmosphere that could be realised upon the project's completion. This idealistic imagery can be highlighted as a "best-practice" conceptual imagery in these projects. The attention to conceptual imagery prioritizes the public audience

and can lead to greater success in public response. The reverse can be seen on the USPS site and in other projects, as project managers de-prioritize this component amid the current public backlash against these large development projects. While this example of conceptual imagery is a good one and is by far the best found within the USPS Document, I believe there is a different approach to these images that can paradoxically feel more real and more personal to audiences, while actually avoiding realism.

In the context of architectural development concepts, the realist style is one marked by a signature collaged look. These images are often well-rendered 3D models of the completed projects reflecting the architectural firm's plans, with added scenery and people collaged in, that is to say, cut from a photo and pasted into a still of the 3D model with digital re-touching to add color and atmosphere. These thoughtful details, as referenced in the previous chapter, draw an audience into the minutiae of a scene. This style of imagery and its widespread use are often attributed to project managers' and stakeholders' need for firm control over the narrative and structure of a given project. The use of 3D models and collaged actors allows for greater control and flexibility for leadership, which can be easier to achieve through other artistic methods. The use of a 3D model for the scene means the image will be as accurate as possible to any given architectural plan, with precise dimensions and easily replaceable assets, allowing the replacement of entire buildings or street layouts if needed. The use of collaged actors and props saves time on illustration, and these actors and objects can pose for a hundred or so takes in a single session and then be manipulated to fit any given scene without the need for reshooting after receiving editorial notes from a committee. While the upsides of this style are clear, there are trade-offs and lost opportunities in relying on it.

Section 2.3: OMSI District Project

A similar project in a more junior stage of development can be found on the other side of the Willamette River, along the Southeast Waterfront, in the proposed OMSI District. The Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) is a popular spot for people of all ages to gather, learn, and have fun. OMSI, the community, and Indigenous leaders have been working on a district concept since 2008. However, the city did not advance it until 2018 (“Future OMSI District”). OMSI’s website states that the master plan document was approved by the Portland Metro Council in February of 2023, though it cannot be found on the site in its entirety. It is possible to view most of the document via a YouTube recording of a Zoom meeting hosted by the Oregon branch of the nonprofit organization The American Institute of Architects (Lienhart et al. *Urban Design Panel 03.15.22 - OMSI Central City Master Plan*). However, the OMSI website includes a full document detailing how OMSI’s board listens to and communicates with the public and other partners for this project. But the document is

relevant, as it can help identify how the *site* of the audience is affecting the *site* of production and, therefore, the *site* of the image for the visual communication of this project. Within the document, attention is given to the importance of OMSI in collaborative community planning for this district, with significant effort devoted to the feedback of often marginalized communities. One of the main facilities planned for the project is a proposed Center for Tribal Nations, a proposal created in collaboration with the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, the Northwest Native Chamber, and the Center for Tribal Nations Advisory Committee. This, in combination with the goal of dense, mixed-use pedestrian- and bike-focused infrastructure, shows that this project is well aligned with Marohn's and Jacobs' Strong Town framework. Within this document as well is a section outlined as "Communicating Vision and Impact" that in its opening paragraph tells us exactly what problems are facing this project in terms of public perception, stating: "Participants in the listening process pointed out a general lack of awareness among the community – people do not know about OMSI's vision, commitments to equity, and goals for the District. They are also unfamiliar with the details of the development process, or wary of major real estate developers and their motives. Participants feel engagement fatigue and have been let down by false promises in the past" ("Listening Report" 29).

OMSI's primary conceptual image (Figure 005) demonstrates the same limitations as the USPS approach—collaged photographic elements in a realist style that prioritizes architectural accuracy over emotional engagement or narrative. In the section, OMSI outlines positive actions that they can take to improve this notion, including culturally relevant communication, an open communication strategy that shares successes and failures, progress checks, and community design forums. While all of these actions could yield positive outcomes, one area in the *site* of production where OMSI has not succeeded is its visual communication style. OMSI in this document declares its desire to "Sell the Vision" and to have "clear measures of success." A greater effort towards visual communication will greatly help in these aspects. This project's current visual communication aligns almost stroke-for-stroke with the USPS project, with its main piece of conceptual imagery being a few collage-style artworks. While this is not a poor piece of conceptual imagery, the style does have its limitations. This style of artwork is hardly sufficient to inspire or sell a vision for an entirely new city district.



Fig. 005 Page 2 of “OMSI District Economic Impacts” 2025

We could conclude through the methods of communication used that project managers in charge of the USPS master plan held the audience of architects, developers, and city leaders in higher regard than the public. OMSI has performed better and at times worse in public communication and has used different means. While the extensive document outlining their goals and what they’ve learned from extensive public engagement sessions is certainly a marked improvement over the USPS master plan. Yet OMSI’s master plan document still lacks innovation in communication. This is not because of what it contains, as visual sites are practically identical to the USPS document and mostly consist of components from architectural and planning diagrams and law-jargon, with limited collage-based conceptual imagery (Figure 005). It fails to a larger degree through the difficulty in access. OMSI provides a two-page shortened version of the master plan document on its website (“Future Omsi District”), but the full master plan itself is functionally inaccessible, available only through the YouTube video mentioned earlier in this section (Lienhart et al. *Urban Design Panel 03.15.22*). It is clear that this has not resulted in good circulation, as the video itself has only 20 views as of the time of writing, serving as proof of its limited reach.

While both projects provide conceptual imagery, they chose to practice the collage-and-3D-model-based approach. This approach constrains creativity and dynamism because of the visual approach's commonality. These factors, alongside choices such as the OMSI project's decision to limit access to its master plan, lead to a failure to generate proper circulation and enthusiasm in these projects. This poses an opportunity: what if these projects inverted their audience priorities, treating illustrative and creative appeal as vital to public engagement, part of a focus on visual communication for a new primary audience?

Ch 3: Illustrated + Animated Approaches to Urban Vision

Given that urban development projects rarely use illustrated or animated approaches to conceptual imagery, we must look elsewhere for examples of their success. Adjacent fields in the marketing sector can provide a vision for success. Marketing inherently contains one primary goal: to create media that appeals to an audience, whether targeted or broad. While marketing is primarily associated with private capital institutions, there are success stories of using illustrative and animated approaches for public-sector institutions; one prominent example is promoting tourism.

Section 3.1: Successful models from adjacent fields

A piece of visual communication we can look at as an example of ideal visual communication, and one that is culturally relevant to this project, is a three-part series of ads commissioned by the Oregon Tourism Commission, the state's official tourism agency, better known by its brand name, Travel Oregon. These ads, titled in order, are “Only Slightly Exaggerated”, “Only Slightly (More) Exaggerated”, and “Still Only Slightly Exaggerated” the first two published to the Travel Oregon YouTube channel in 2019 and the third published to the same channel in 2021 (“Only Slightly Exaggerated”)[“Only Slightly (More) Exag.”][“Still Only Slightly Exag.”).

These commercials, produced by Psyop and Sun Creature Studios, are advertisements that promote natural and cultural aspects of the state of Oregon in an artistic style reminiscent of the Japanese animated film director Hayao Miyazaki. While featuring “exaggerated” elements, such as mystical woodland ents, a bigfoot-esque creature, giant flower-trodding rabbits, and cloud people who control the weather. The majority of places and events featured therein are true to Oregon. Because of this whimsical approach and the visual relation to Miyazaki’s work, there is an understanding at the *site* of audiencing that the visuals are not to be taken literally and are rather meant to be a playful, engaging way of showcasing what the state has to offer. An aspect of these videos that cannot be overlooked is the success they garnered in the *site* of circulation. The ads garnered widespread popularity, reaching 830k, 1.2 million, and another 1.2 million views respectively on the Travel Oregon YouTube channel. Reposts of these also reached tens of thousands more people from all over the world on TikTok (“Commercial still only slightly exaggerated / través Oregon”) and Instagram (“Travel Oregon ‘still only slightly exaggerated’ new commercial by @suncreaturestudio”), driving interest in Oregon tourism, and smashing the goal for the ads out of the park. The goal of

these ads was not just to show off what Oregon has to offer in tourist activities, but to actively utilize the *site* of circulation by creating a piece of art that drew interest from groups that would not usually have a particular interest in travelling to Oregon.

While projects such as the OMSI district may not have access to the capital for advertising and marketing, such as Travel Oregon, a highly-produced animated short, is not the only type of medium that could draw this sort of attention. Especially if the draw only needs to extend within a city the size of Portland, approximately 2.5 million people in the metropolitan area. A sufficiently impressive output of artistic and creative talent could draw more interest in a project from those who, as participants in the OMSI communications study, labeled themselves as “engagement fatigued”. For example, a busy working mother in the Portland Metro Area is more likely to support a project if she can connect it to something enjoyable and lively, as Travel Oregon did, by tapping into people's positive attachment to Studio Ghibli's animated movies through style and substance.

A successful approach to visual communication within the scope of this project, following the suggestions here, could include a colorful, dynamic atmosphere that appeals to people who want to see an area that feels “lived-in” rather than artificial or sterile. This could include hypothetical representations of local businesses in the district with distinct characteristics and personalities, or of an active community and street life, as Jacobs described in Boston and in other examples in her book.

The Strong Towns framework for city planning is not just in action during the development process, but also in the fruits of its efforts in the thriving communities it was meant to create and rebuild. character is harder to represent through traditional developmental visual communication, as it requires a more liberal and creative approach to the communication process; that is, any visual media portraying these hypothetical or proposed communities inherently require a level of creative freedom often not found in the traditional governmental or private-sector processes.

One immediate conclusion when presenting a transformative development from those in leadership positions is one of caution. An illustrative approach wrests narrative control away from them, granting it to creatives and the public's interpretation. Communication with the public through government agencies or private developers carries a certain risk of being seen as over-promising or even lying about goals during and after development. The OMSI listening report outlines participants' fatigue and disappointment over a perceived failure to even partially fulfill promises made during the development process. While disappointing constituents is a key concern, it is important to distinguish another difference between the type of visuals at the *site* of image itself that I've described here, and those being used on these former projects. The traditional approach to conceptual imagery, which is often 3D renderings of project plans with a collage of photographed people, animals, and flora, and its

ties to realism, leaves very little room for interpretation and is therefore seen as more literal descriptors rather than interpretations. There is an understanding among the audience when they see animated or drawn imagery that what they're seeing is not an absolute description of reality, but rather a suggestion or implication of a more fantastic reality. In this way, animated portrayals of these communities could convey a more personal and emotional representation of projects, without the weight and promise implied by a literal rendering of the final product. While this approach is not exempt from criticism or comparison to a final product, illustrative imagery serves only as an individual piece of a project's communication and does not in its entirety contextualize the whole of a project of this scale. Rather, it serves only a part of the whole, reaching beyond the traditional boundaries of circulation to draw interest to the pre-existing, more measured representations already found within the documents discussed.

Section 3.2 Demonstration through the OMSI case

As a continuation of the analysis of the OMSI project, I provide a targeted example of two illustrations placed within the OMSI development project (Figs. 006, 007). They reference an existing piece of conceptual imagery from the OMSI plan. These illustrations align with the positives in the existing conceptual image (Fig. 008), such as the earthy color scheme and adherence to Jacobsian design principles. Therefore, I chose to focus on a particular image featuring a prominent pedestrian-only street, many storefronts, and residential balconies overlooking the public space. One of Jacobs' principles is "eyes on the street" - an environment that provides safety and builds community By pushing occupants to face outward and interact with the public realm instead of isolating them. I have represented this dynamic through a shot-reverse-shot dual illustration of a resident's home and balcony, with the reverse shot being the balcony view. This dynamic uses Jacobs' concepts to show



Fig. 006



Fig. 007

prospective residents how living and interacting within the district could work. The placement of the camera over the resident's shoulder puts the audience in the same position as the resident, allowing them to imagine themselves in that house, looking out over that street, and experiencing the same tranquility as our illustrated resident. The dynamism of the drawn environment adds to the image's immersion, as the illustrative method conveys perspectives and information not easily conveyed through 3D rendering. For example, in Fig. 007, the perspective is warped into a semi-fisheye lens, allowing the image to include as much information about the street-scape as possible while keeping the vital parts of the scene in focus, a function difficult or impossible to achieve in 3D software due to its rigidity. Simultaneously, it holds the balcony resident in frame to draw a connection between it and Fig. 006. An illustrative design style allows for micro-stories and characters to be explored within these conceptual images. An example of a micro-story, in Figure 007, we can see a teacher leading a group of students on an outing, as a man on a bench leans over to listen. The style allows for a more personable character to be placed in Fig. 006, encouraging the audience to emotionally connect with the subject and, by extension, the environment.

This approach, as discussed in the last chapter, produces a different response from the public audience than a standard diagram or a collaged piece. The piece's illustrative nature allows the audience to superimpose their own imaginative possibilities onto it, fostering greater enthusiasm for projects that have the potential to fulfill such futures. While this piece is limited in scope, it includes these aspects to suggest a potential path forward for future projects. A focus on conceptual imagery and, in particular, a more liberal creative process based on illustrated, fantastical/romanticized, and/or animated media can start this effect. The care taken at the *site* of production leads to increased interest and quality at the *site* of the image. This quality of image, once distributed to community members and to internet circles,

leads to a more immersed and actively interested *site* of audience. This engaged audience re-shares and speaks about the image itself, re-circulating it, creating a cycle in which the image re-circulates through audience engagement and interest. As urban development projects continue to face hindered support and public realm exhaustion, this focus on visual communication, combined with urbanist/Jacobsian principles, can lead to a more positive, proactive community interest.



Fig. 008 Page 2 of "OMSI District Economic Impacts" 2022, notes to illustrate placement of Fig. 006 / 007*

Conclusion

Current visual communication approaches prioritize technical audiences (developers, agencies, investors) over public engagement. A shift towards illustration and animation enables a form of communication that inspires creativity in the local population and creates goodwill through positive mental associations with other non-developer work, such as beloved movies or TV shows. This approach addresses the failures of the current method by shifting the visual focus of a project away from appeasing internal stakeholders and towards appealing to the audience most affected by, and privy to, suspicion of development projects.

While this thesis uses the example of the success of this method in an adjacent field, the Travel Oregon series of ads, there is no proven example of success for this approach specifically within urban development or public works projects. It is through the research here that I argue, using a bespoke system of analysis to break down master plan documents alongside Gillian Rose's analytical framework for visual analysis, that there is an approach to viability. The next steps from this analysis are the implementation and proof of effectiveness. For implementation, there is the question of who bears responsibility for changing their practice. There could be an assumption of a top-down change in approach, with an

impassioned effort from project leads or officials to shift course, as they are the ones with the most authority. Yet if we were to follow the teachings and ideas of Jacobs and Strong Towns, there is a belief in and a desire for a bottom-up change in approach. This change could be achieved by passionate, independent creative community members creating works outside agencies, following the outline for illustrative or animated work described here to promote their own development ideas. More likely, the change could come from creatives working within agencies proposing more radical options to their project leads, backed by the arguments for viability made in this paper. The barrier to implementation does not lie solely in institutional rigidity, though; it is true that while an illustrative method does not often lead to cost increases, an animated approach would likely entail higher costs if we are to follow industry-standard pricing. In the local industry in Dublin, it is recommended by colleagues in the industry to typically charge around €15,000 (\$17,400 USD as of time of writing) per minute of animation, though some US studios such as Disney or Warner Brothers Animation can typically run costs of over \$100,000 per minute of feature quality animation (“How much animation costs per minute to produce.”).

Adoption of this approach does not mean the erasure of all former methods, as there is still reason to appeal to the audiences of developers and agencies through architectural diagrams and legal jargon. The suggestion here is that implementation should focus on the restructuring and accompaniment of more conceptual imagery with these new methods. As these projects often fail to circulate their conceptual pieces outside of master plans and pdf documents, a strategy in implementing these new methods as pieces that can exist outside of these documents, and rather as stand-alone pieces of communication meant solely to engage with the public, without the necessity to fit into the existing structure of common planning outreach documents.

While the change in approach to communication practices may come from the top, this does not stop individuals and advocacy groups from using the methods described in this paper to inspire interest and spark conversation about their own independent projects and/or other projects they are fighting for, whether urban design-focused or not. Agencies such as Strong Towns and successful advocates such as Jacobs show that there is a popular, active grassroots movement that promotes the ideas these projects are fighting for. The gap lies in the advocacy of these organizations and the implementation of these ideas against the forces of NIMBYism (Not In My BackYard) and anti-urban bureaucratic interests, and in how to reach mass public appeal when standard methods of outreach fall short. There is a vast amount of public-facing urban planning work done in the world today that relies purely on goodwill or data sheets to curry positive public sentiment, and car-centric and anti-human urbanism spreads unabated because of the public's indifference and lack of interest. A vast,

untapped well of creative practices and talent is available to create communication that can engage communities in the decisions that can transform their communities for their benefit.

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