

Critical Review Article

A Critique of Urban Design Framework Services Description

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Abstract

Urban Design Framework is a documentary qualitative study employing a process-oriented approach whose application requires a similar procedural planning process at the city level to comply with that. The absence of such a fundamental basis and the lack of systematic knowledge of the content and outcomes of this approach may lead to an inappropriate result that undermines its application. There are basic challenges in understanding the concept of the Urban Design Framework and the application of this approach as a whole. There is also a contradiction in the procedure of activities. Apart from that, its contents and outcomes are subject to ambiguity. However, the fundamental problem of this service description is its integration within the wider framework of the statutory planning document. Reviewed Urban Design Framework service description includes two levels of studies, whose incorporation into one toolkit is not only unnecessary but also inappropriate. The reason lies in the feasibility of procedures. A three-dimensional Master plan is a supplementary tool introduced in this toolkit, which has basic ambiguity in its title, content, and applications. The most important challenge posed by this Master plan is associated with a procedural aspect and refers to the timing of its application, which is supposed to happen at the same time as the Framework itself is being developed, without the participation of stakeholders, beneficiaries, and the interested groups. In addition, service description in this level (Master Plan) has posed challenges in terms of the content and the nature of outcomes.

Keywords: *Spatial planning, Policy plan, Process oriented urban design, Design guideline, Design code, Core strategy.*

Introduction

Over the last three decades, Urban Design Framework (Henceforth UDF) has undergone fundamental changes, ranging from product-

oriented urban design to process-oriented urban design.

The cornerstone of spatial planning, which originated in the Anglo-Saxon nations and was later extended throughout European societies, is policy and process-oriented urban design. It is

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founded on the identity and quality of place and space.

A UDF is one of the intermediary documents at the Area-Specific level, which serves as the basis for the development framework and is one of the primary upstream documents used for developing Action Area Plans.

To address the inefficiency of the Master Plan and regulations, the spatial planning paradigm was introduced. Western designers and planners believe that in this approach the allocation of land use, the substantial features of places, and most importantly, the wishes of communities have been overlooked. In this regard, the general city-level regulations exacerbate the incongruity between the forms/functions and the nature, the substantial features of the place, and the Area-Specific.

As a result, Site or Area Specific qualitative studies, serve as an approach being developed versus the comprehensive land use to be applied.

The UDF document, which is originally a process-oriented one, has been used in Western societies for more than a decade. The application of this document complies with the documents of the urban development plan and needs to be prepared based on a strategic approach. The design policies of this document can be integrated into the development plan policy framework (local development framework).

This document has been subject to ambiguous, different, and even contradictory interpretations in Iran, and a service description developed on which and under the same title even mismatches the original documents in terms of substantial and procedural aspects.

The most significant challenge posed by these inconsistencies is how to integrate them with the city's statutory document. The reason is that the content of its process-oriented outcomes cannot be merged with two-level, comprehensive, and detailed documents based on land use and regulations. Design policies based on the semantic and perceptual perspectives and qualitative considerations (e.g.

identity and sense of place) are too intangible to be presented in these documents, but all decisions on how to develop the place have already been taken in the comprehensive land use plan and regulations. In full-fledged urban design documents, all outcomes from the city-level scale to specific locations are interconnected through a multi-level process. In addition, environmental and spatial values related to all levels of the city's statutory document outcomes are presented.

One of the primary challenges in integrating qualitative documents with current development plans is the absence of comprehensive urban planning laws, whose review removes practical obstacles and facilitates the interconnectivity of the documents.

Practical guidelines and the outcome of qualitative documents are primarily set out to be aligned and integrated with spatial planning approaches, and they need to lend themselves to integration through multi-level processes with the aforementioned approach.

This technique of urban design has recently been taught in some educational environments and urban design schools in Iran. However, this concept of urban design has been open to various unprofessional interpretations. Thus, both employers and the professional community interpret this approach based on their tastes.

Urban design framework

• Challenges in understanding the concept of the urban design framework

The term "Urban Design Framework" in the UK planning documents has been used since the introduction of the strategic-local planning paradigm (French, 1988; Salet & Faludi, 1999). It attempts to provide a set of design policies (about the capabilities of spatial quality and identity) for a changing area. The developments mainly appear in the form of sites and areas based on the qualitative capabilities of the place. In this process, the spatial capabilities are preserved and improved, and the citations and spatial

references of these studies are mainly developed to identify and determine opportunities for change and development. They lack accurate geometric and geographical transparency and only contain design guidelines for area-specific projects.

The outcome of urban design studies at different scales is classified as a Guidance in the Strategic Plan / Local Plan paradigm. The city-level statutory document of which is called the “Development Plan”. It comprises only the qualitative dimensions of the environment (Mastop, 2000; Mastop & Faludi, 1997). The scope of the studies includes:

1. Urban design strategy
2. Urban design framework
3. Urban design brief

Supplementary Design Guidance and advisory suggestions should be attached to the (Development Plan) statutory documents of the city in necessary cases, although they are not required to be referred to. As previously mentioned, research on cognition processes, evaluation, and design policies are solely concerned with quality features and content, which include spatial, physical, and visual concerns, as well as public realms.

However, in the spatial planning paradigm, the city-level document is called the Local Development Framework (Henceforth, LDF) (Christmann, Ibert, Jessen & Walther, 2020; Morphet, 2011), which sets out the Policy Framework. Quality considerations in the form of the design policy serve as a basis for this document. The spatial planning documents include a variety of scales, ranging from urban design-based scales to site or area ones.

For this reason, on-Site and Area-Specific independent qualitative studies are classified as Urban Design Documents and not as a recommendation guide. Such studies are integrated into the statutory documents of the city and serve as one of the requirements of development documents. Action Area Plans refer to large area studies that fall under the LDF. It contains documents such as the Development Framework and the Development Brief (Morphet, 2011). The Development Framework

consists of an urban design framework and a simultaneous planning framework. In this case, it is stipulated that land use planning, transportation, and infrastructure studies be carried out at the same time that urban design documents are being prepared. This document is the “Development Framework.”

The LDF documents may propose various specialized studies, such as special ecological or social reviews for places and areas.

Accordingly, since the description of the services includes detailed plan documents, the name of the document needs to change to “Development Framework” from “Urban Design Framework”, and if it is to be an urban design framework, it should just focus on the qualitative dimensions of the environment.

B-Challenges in the procedures and process of planning

• **Challenges in the place of the Strategic Area, outcomes, and contents of decision-making levels**

As mentioned before, the strategic and process-oriented approach to urban design studies requires key and large-scale decisions to be incorporated into the upstream processes and placed on the brief of the downstream studies.

If the role and contents of the UDF for areas in urban studies (urban design strategies) have been defined, then there is no need for this stage of the process. However, if the decision has yet to be made at this level, it is necessary to first define the strategic studies of areas. Then macro decision-making and qualitative guidelines for the development of the framework should be developed.

Accordingly, these guidelines need to be developed before starting the framework studies, and the approach and method of conducting the framework studies should be specified.

Meanwhile, in the description of services, the implications associated with the visions and the outcomes of the strategic area have been transformed into the output of the framework studies.

The contents of decision-making in the strategic area

include the perspective, goals, and spatial strategies that are included in the formation of the spatial order of the strategic area (including the framework zone); thus, the spatial order of the strategic area will contribute to the continuity and complement of the spatial order of the framework of an area.

Based on what has been discussed, strategic studies are used:

- To determine the role and place of the framework of an area;
- To set out an agenda based on the type of framework studies;
- To develop a vision and study development strategies for the framework area;

Accordingly, strategic reviews must be carried out before the initiation of framework studies and aim at providing strategic implications. Procedural perspectives in urban design studies include the process of identifying the situation, its evaluation, and making decisions in this regard. The new positive approach to urban design introduces this process as analysis, synthesis, and implementation (which are three key steps in the procedural dimension). It deals with examining and recognizing the components of the decomposition phenomenon in the exploration process. The synthesis process refers to the qualitative and quantitative monitoring and evaluation of a phenomenon and the implication (decision) process provides a solution to address the challenges and define the desired path.

However, in the description of services, the term status evaluation is used for identifying the situation in Section 2-2-2, and the same term has been used again to analyze the situation in Section 3-2-2. However, two phases in process of learning need to be differentiated by two different terms.

If these studies are to serve as “Urban Design Frameworks,” then in the stage of exploration (as the description of services indicates the essential contents), defining the essential dimensions of quality and identity should be the concern. In other words, the essence of objects in identifying the objectivity of the place and the observer’s experience

of that is an essential dimension and includes only the dimensions of environmental quality in urban design, which include “Spatial Dimension”, “Visual Dimension”, “Physical Dimension” and “Quality of Public Realm” (Zekavat, 2018). Obviously, for each of these dimensions, the phenomenon of objectivity is not mental and refers to the internal experience of the observer, in other words, mental perception is not an independent dimension, and the observer must reflect objective and subjective attention to each of these dimensions.

In Section 2-2-2 - b, the structural system of public spaces (spatial structure) has been mentioned and in its sub-section, issues, and concepts related to the system of public zones are discussed. It should be noted that the system or spatial structure, which is one of the important dimensions of environmental quality, includes different issues and concepts in the actual nature as well as decision-making about the place, which is one of the key topics in urban design. As mentioned in the UDF document, in the first stage, only the essential dimensions of quality and spatial identity are examined objectively and subjectively, and these dimensions include spatial, visual, physical, and public zone components.

• Identifying the situation at the strategic area level

There is an emphasis on spatial order, visual order, and the public realm order. The scale of perception at this level is strategic.

In the stage of preparation of spatial maps, SWAT has a special place and plays a key role in developing a policy plan but there is no description of services in this regard.

The UDF map is the same as the policy plan in Section 4 -4, which describes the location of design policies in all qualitative and essential components, and the pattern of spatial organization is the cause of cohesion and connectivity of these places.

The most important element reflecting the transparency of design policies and policy plans is the design guidelines reinforcing design policies in various disciplines and is one of the key products

serving as a basis for the urban design framework that has been neglected in the description of the proposed services.

• Section 4 - 5 Developing the structure of design areas

To clarify the issue, the Latin word (Character Area Structure Map) has been used in this section.

The term Character Area map in physical order refers to the map of morphological areas that differ from one another in terms of the arrangement, microorganisms as well as dominant species of urban appearance (in visual order), and physical-visual identity. In the policy-making process, design policies design codes, and design guidelines must be considered to maintain and enhance identity distinctions.

However, the service description probably refers to the introduction of spatial opportunities that constitute the areas and places of local plans. The most important mission of the pattern of spatial order is to establish a spatial order between actual places and activities with places of potential activities and opportunities to locate new distribution of activities. This spatial organization is not limited to the privacy of the framework and is related to the activities and centers of the strategic area, and the spatial organization will be the framework aligned and connected with the spatial organization of the strategic area. For this reason, the most important outcome of strategic reviews in the first stage is to draw the pattern of spatial organization, which also includes the framework of the area.

All studies in the LDF document are iterative and this is the contents of the “Core Strategy” products, which in the stage of recognizing the quality and identity of places and with the decisions of local communities, the core strategy that is part of the vision and the review process is done annually.

In Section 5, entitled “Action Plan”, the mission of this section is to prepare an urban design brief (UD. Brief) for sites and opportunities. It also includes setting design goals, principles, and guidelines for preparing a three-dimensional Master Plan for specific areas.

Challenges in the contents of products

• Challenges in the nature of conceptual design

In the description of services (Section 4-4-), the conceptual design is defined as follows:

“A UDF plan is a spatial-geographical reflection of urban design policies which is presented in the form of a diagram based on the conceptual design of an area.

“The plan provides a general framework for the proposed patterns of land use development, movement and access, public spaces, physical form, and urban landscape.”

In the explanation of the contents of the conceptual design in the service description, it has been mentioned the “conceptual design” is essentially a diagrammatic plan that is supposed to organize the spatial design policies of places in a way that is a kind of spatial-geographical reflection.

Therefore, from this description, it is inferred that conceptual design refers to the concept of designing a large-scale model. It contains a shift from the previous paradigms of urban design related to the Edmund Bacon era, which contrasts with the mature and process-oriented urban design.

In other words, “conceptual design” is a kind of concept to regulate and adjust the design policies of places in the context of urban design. This regulation is an emphasis to facilitate the spatial relationship between places and the place of policies and the center of activities, and this regulation affects citizens’ perceptions of the spatial organization of activities and their physical consequences (signs and visualization of places).

The above-mentioned concepts are the definition of “spatial organization” which is within the scope of the UDF, and the use of the Design Concept is inappropriate for this category. Therefore, the future spatial structure of development opportunities and centers manifests both concepts and contents.

It is the strategic pattern of spatial order, which includes the discipline of spatial strategies and opportunities at the city level or strategic area.

It is the pattern of spatial organization, which includes the spatial discipline of opportunity design policies at the level of the framework of the area.

The pattern of spatial organization at the area level integrates key opportunities for the development of key locations, centers of activity and function of sign elements, gates, and gate opportunities, equipped urban axes, ecological areas, etc. to shape the new spatial organization of the area. The new spatial order, with the help of strategic studies for the area, is responsible for integrating the spatial skeleton of the framework of the area with the strategic area. In other words, in choosing the different alternatives for spatial order of the framework of the area, the optimal alternative is necessary to have a favorable correlation with the arrangement of elements of spatial order (activity axes, activity centers, index, and gate index elements, etc.).

• **Challenges in selecting a conceptual alternative**

Selecting and optimizing the conceptual model of the spatial organization are the most important aspects of strategic planning. Since the choice of strategic and policy decisions in a field with different disciplines can have adverse effects on the decisions of other areas, this issue is not the scope of decision-making of a product-oriented conceptual model, and the layout and choice of strategies and policies of each option must be consistent with each other.

Evaluating the different alternatives for the layout of strategies (each of which is an option of the “strategic pattern” of the spatial organization) requires a special analysis process

In addition, the pattern of the spatial organization framework of the area reinforces the strategic pattern of spatial order that continues from the strategic area to the framework of the area. The strategy of the space organization is possible only through the Analysis of Interconnected Decision Areas) (Harary, Jessop, Luckman & Stringer, 1965).

• **Challenges in the content of titles and products (projects)**

In the service description, the urban design brief for

all sites and development opportunities are provided. Such a brief is an independent urban design document with a description of tasks described independently of the UDF.

It is necessary to explain that the urban design brief itself is an independent urban design document that is prepared for all opportunities falling outside of the mission of the urban design framework and if the feasibility of each site or area is achieved, this document should be adjusted considering the conditions of Stakeholders (Strydom, Puren, & Drewes, 2018).

This includes the comprehensive three-dimensional document (Spatial Master Plan). However, these documents outline a very short vision depending on the demands of the investment groups, which will be determined later. Therefore, preparing them in advance or at the time when the urban design framework document is being developed is impossible.

Accordingly, it is not necessary to prepare an urban design brief for all or even one of the sites and development opportunities at the same time an urban design framework is being prepared.

What is expected to define the sites and opportunities introduced in the urban design framework is associated with their role and applications in accordance with the vision and goals of the framework and introduction of the general concept of development.

However, the most important product of urban design documents in the spatial planning paradigm is the production of visions and practical guidelines for more detailed urban design studies for local plans. This important thing is called “Core Strategy”, which introduces the role and importance of development opportunities according to the macro perspective and spatial organization, and includes design policies and design guidelines (Morphet, 2011).

• **Challenges in adapting to the comprehensive plan**

The contents of a Process-Oriented decision-making

framework and multi-level urban design policy-maker are not compatible with a prescriptive but comprehensive product-oriented plan.

The design policies of a UDF are informed by the strategic policies of upstream levels. Such policies do not comply with the principles of lower-level design whose degree of feasibility is defined in relation to the views and design guidelines developed based on geographical environments and location.

The spatial planning paradigm and the city-level flexible document of the LDF, whose policies are monitored annually, do not comply with the land use confirmation document and its implementation rules (Dühr, 2007; Morphet, 2011).

Design policies of a UDF can only be implemented with process-oriented plan documents in the line of design guidelines and codes.

In spatial planning, planning documents and a comprehensive UDF or Development Framework are implemented in the form of an Action Area Plan. Upstream decisions (at the city level) are general (strategic policies) and in the documents of the operational areas, the decisions are made about their details and if necessary, more detailed documents such as development brief or design codes are prepared. Thus, the comprehensive plan has no place in this regard.

This important thing can be achieved in Iran if the comprehensive urban planning laws of the country serve as a basis for the full-fledged decision-making paradigm

• **Three-dimensional Master Plan (spatial)**

Challenge in applications, contents, and dimensions of the design procedures

The description of the services of the spatial Master Plan has posed a challenge in terms of procedure, defining the process of actions, contents, and products. The contents and products of the service description indicate that there is no correct and deep understanding of the nature and goals of the Master Plan.

• **Challenges in the title of the plan**

If the descriptions of services do not find their way into the Master plan for this purpose, they will not receive the attention of developers and users.

In Local Development Framework (LDF) documents,

new spatial opportunities shaped by the quality and identity of the place form the basis of the spatial planning paradigm. Accordingly, the development documents of these places in the framework of local development in terms of Space, Spatial, and Spatiality contain two key missions (Davoudi & Strange 2008).

1- Establishing spatial order with other places and centers as a new element for the evolution of LDF space organization.

2- Shaping the urban spaces within and adjacent to the site

Accordingly, the term “spatial” does not stand for the “three-dimensional” aspect but refers to the evolution of the urban spatial organization within the site of the Master Plan. Therefore, the title of this document in the main literature is “Spatial Master plan” Basically, the spatial organization is a key issue in the city-wide spatial planning paradigm, which is formed by the gradual development of sites, places, and areas, and master spatial plans have a special meaning and importance in this regard.

• **Challenges in the absence of the addressed community in the project (ambiguity in the purpose of preparing the project)**

The key goal of the spatial Master plan is to reflect the desires of the involved groups and align them with the desires of the users and the control monitoring device. Thus, the most important mission of the plan is to identify and reflect the perspectives of groups, organizations, developers, and stakeholders (Christmann et al., 2020; Strydom et al., 2018). Therefore, identifying and investigating the viewpoints of groups, organizations and stakeholders and decision-makers is a priority, and the Master Plan contributes to shaping this goal.

The Master Plan is not a statutory guiding development. Rather, the spatial Master plan is an exchange tool that can be used to foster an understanding between the parties involved and the plan monitoring and control system.

o It is a tool used to find an investor.

o It is also used to accurately calculate the cost-benefit and to justify the plan economically.

o It is also about convincing local communities of

the form of development in their neighborhood and the profitability of services for stakeholders.

• Challenges in procedure and the process of activities

These studies, which are part of the detailed plans of urban design, can be placed under the umbrella of the urban design framework or can be presented separately. However, they are considered stages independent of the urban design framework. Upstream studies of the Master Plan can be compiled from two perspectives:

1. They can be conducted to support the urban design framework. In that case, the core strategies that are developed as the outcomes of the framework, become a kind of guidelines for the preparation of a spatial Master Plan.

2. If a Spatial Master Plan is prepared independently of the urban design framework and in its absence, then the key part of the work process in the strategic framework stage is the “site development agenda”.

As mentioned in the first section, the preparation of an urban design brief for development opportunities is not part of the urban design framework mission, and the preparation of such a brief is an independent design agenda after the preparation of the framework. “Core strategy” is one of the outcomes of the framework used for determining the tasks and opportunities and does not act as an agenda (Zekavat, 2018). On the other hand, in the process of preparing a spatial master plan, the first stage is different from the contents and outcomes of the brief. At this stage, the important part is to investigate the views of the addressed communities. Locals are involved in its optimal selection (Morphet, 2011; Roodbol-Mekkes & Van den Brink, 2015). The most important mission of this stage is to develop the design and regulations that form the principles of the Master Plan, which is a combination of the guidelines of the upstream studies and the detailed knowledge of the place (Faludi, 2000). The key mission of the Master Plan is to achieve the functional role and physical density of the development area so that its investment is justifiable for the stakeholders. Therefore, economic

feasibility studies on location development which are also requirements of the plan, and the outcomes of function and activity, as well as physical density, are ultimately determined by this approach (Morphet, 2011; Roodbol-Mekkes & Van den Brink, 2015). Therefore, to estimate the cost and benefit of a project, an accurate estimation of levels and cost of implementation, as well as the type of profitable activities is needed. This requires accurate physical and functional specifications. This is the main reason why a Spatial Master Plan needs to include economic feasibility studies. However, the description of the services has not included this key mission of the Master Plan in the optimization phase. Alternatives and options evaluation are among an important part of the process of preparing a comprehensive plan. More importantly, as alternatives are prepared based on different opportunities and principles, and approaches to performance and activity, they result in different costs/benefits. The audit process continues to the advanced stages of the project, to enable decision-making for all parties involved, as well as urban management. Beneficiaries, who are local communities, obviously play the most important role in deciding whether to choose or produce a new hybrid option (Christmann et al., 2020; Dühr, 2007; Strydom et al., 2018).

The process of preparing a spatial master plan includes

- A. Strategic framework
- B. Guidelines and ideas for a spatial Master Plan
- C. Feasibility and implementation plan

A. The Strategic Framework

The strategic framework consists of two levels of studies.

Guidelines are based on comprehensive studies on sites to determine the application and guidelines.

Principles and design codes are presented in the continuous process of developing the first guidelines and after conducting detailed studies on the site, which is the basis of the design and ideas of the proposed Master plan.

The first step in the process of preparing this plan is to conduct strategic framework studies, during which it is necessary to identify and investigate the perspectives of decision-makers and stakeholders.

The guidelines of upstream documents, especially qualitative upstream documents need to be studied. In the absence of such outcomes, a strategic area should be determined, and the necessary qualitative studies should be first carried out in the entire comprehensive area.

Qualitative and quantitative studies need to be carried out to get a better grasp of the situation and economic feasibility

Qualitative studies in this project are carried out at a very detailed level to produce the agendas and design principles.

In these studies, the visual order of the place, and the public zone system are emphasized to connect the places and maintain the physical order.

The description of the above services does contain detailed knowledge and its content. In the evaluation stage, the status of site potentials is analyzed and audited.

Guidelines and ideas for the spatial Master Plan

At this stage, based on the outcomes of the strategic framework and the design brief, the Master Plan alternatives with different goals and strategies, and even plans are developed. According to the stakeholders' and users' interests as well as users' opinions, the alternatives have been evaluated and optimized using the Planning Balance Sheet method. One of the key challenges of the description of the Master Plan services is the process related to the production stage of control regulations. Both control regulations and design codes are provided to guide the desired content of the master plan. However, in the description of the proposed services, the regulations and standards of urban design (Section 6-2-6) have been produced and presented after the preparation of the Master Plan and even compiled as part of the outcomes of the plan. If the description of services offers secondary regulations to serve as

guiding principles for architectural design, it would be useless. The reason is that the contents of the first part of phase one of architectural design services are guided and practiced based on the set of design principles and volumetric representation of the Master Plan. However, the rest of the work is an architectural innovation that does not fit into the regulations and the design guides produced are not sufficient for this mission.

Conclusion

The successful application of the "Urban Design Framework" document necessitates a required and process-oriented alignment between the product and its outcomes based on statutory documents and the city's comprehensive development plan documents. Due to the nature of this document, in the current situation and based on the contents of the comprehensive urban planning laws of the country, creating this compliance is not possible and the documents of the urban development plan have not included such process-oriented procedures.

The most challenging aspect of using this document is how the method and techniques for its preparation should be taught in schools. However, comprehensive and systematic inference, as well as consensus on the process and contents of its product, are not available in urban planning schools, and the degree of awareness about the contents of the urban design varies from one school to another. The great majority of urban design schools still view the subject as primarily product-oriented. This problem has also made the professional and employer communities bewildered and misinformed them about the concepts and content of this document's creation. Given the differences and misconceptions about the process and products of the "Urban Design Framework" regarding the original document, for those studies, which have been consciously developed with the aim of localization and adaptation to the current situation in Iran, choosing a different title is necessary. Such a title needs to align the process with the outcomes defined for it.

Regarding the services introduced under the title of "three-dimensional Master Plan", it should be noted

that the purposes of these urban design studies are to create consensus and facilitate negotiation between stakeholders and urban development management. However, it is not executive and statutory documents. Therefore, it is possible to use it under the existing planning laws of the country. However, it is necessary to formulate a systematic “strategic framework” during its preparation process. For this purpose, and, the demands of the beneficiaries, as well as the participation and supervision of the consumer society, should be taken into account.

Endnotes

1. The initial perspective in the basic review section is a synthesis of previous views and the development of an approach to deal with the spatial order.
2. In the United Kingdom, the process of supporting the spatial planning paradigm primarily focuses on promoting the local community’s favorable landscape for the development of places, and if landowners refuse to agree, the property must be purchased and handed to local communities to shape their landscape.

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