

January 15, 2007

Born to the Elite, New York's Chief City Planner Sweats the Details of the Streets

By [DIANE CARDWELL](#)

When Amanda M. Burden's stepfather, William S. Paley, built the vest-pocket park that bears his name on East 53rd Street, he saw to it that the four wide stone steps from the street, each only five inches high, stood as an invitation to enter.

Those steps "are just perfect," Ms. Burden recently recalled her mentor, the urban scholar William H. Whyte, telling her. "It makes you want to skip into that park."

It is that kind of meticulous focus on the details that Ms. Burden inherited from Mr. Paley, the tycoon who built CBS, and is now using to profound effect in subtly reshaping New York through her role as city planning commissioner.

Whether walking up and down 368 blocks in Jamaica, Queens, to see which streets can accommodate 12-story buildings, or grabbing a tape measure from her desk to set the dimensions of seating in public plazas across the city, Ms. Burden is leaving an indelible legacy of how all five boroughs will look and feel for decades to come.

Ms. Burden, who swirled from Kennedy-era cotillions to the upper echelons of government, has used her power over land-use approvals to impose her own aesthetic sensibility on development projects. Her approach emphasizes open space, continuous shop fronts, and the inclusion of trees and other elements that foster a lively street life. It is visible, for example, in the small sidewalk cafes that are now permitted in much of Manhattan and in the wide ledges encouraging sitting that surround General Motors Plaza at 59th Street and Fifth Avenue.

But she has engendered the hostility of many developers and others tied to the city's powerful real estate industry, who bristle at what they see as her micromanagement of the appearance and even the shape of their buildings, and feel pressured to use celebrity architects like [Frank Gehry](#) and [Norman Foster](#) for major projects. It is a testament to her influence that none of them would speak for the record, but interviews with nearly a dozen people who work in or with the real estate industry show that her approach is not always welcome.

Since her appointment in 2002 by Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#), Ms. Burden has played a powerful behind-the-scenes role in shaping plans at ground zero, in limiting the size of the Atlantic Yards development near Downtown Brooklyn, and in helping push through the High Line project, which will transform a disused rail bed into a linear park linking the West Village to the Far West Side.

She has overseen the biggest comprehensive planning effort since the citywide rezoning of 1961, encompassing nearly 4,500 blocks thus far, including a huge swath along the Williamsburg and Greenpoint waterfronts in Brooklyn, with at least 2,300 blocks more in the pipeline.

She has earned many admirers in planning circles, along with detractors, and few would disagree that she is leaving her imprint on New York.

“She cares about each building and its details in a way that no other planning director has that I can remember, and I go back a long way,” said Jerold S. Kayden, director of the master’s program in urban planning at the [Harvard](#) Graduate School of Design. “She’s wise enough to recognize that what I would call small details or granular moves can either enhance or destroy a city. In a funny way she’s the curator of a living, breathing city.”

If New York is known among urban planners as a city that continually reshapes itself to suit the latest mercantile whims, Ms. Burden has shifted at least part of the focus to the people who live and work there.

There is a strong economic-development component to Ms. Burden’s focus on design — “I think that it makes the city young and exciting to see aggressive and innovative architecture,” she said, naming [Rem Koolhaas](#), Zaha Hadid and Thom Mayne as among her favorites. But her decisions are often guided by a more emotional sensibility and a belief that a city’s health can be measured by the vibrancy of its street life.

“Everything comes down to how it’s going to feel,” she said. “There isn’t very innovative architecture at Battery Park City,” whose design she oversaw as the lead planner. “But people like it because it feels good.”

At a meeting at her office recently to look over plans for new parks along the East River in Manhattan, she asked that some of the seating be arranged to allow for social interaction. And in a pending rezoning of 125th Street, she ordered that banks, because they often close in the afternoon and deaden the stretches of street they occupy, be limited to a small vestibule for A.T.M.’s on the ground floor. The bulk of bank operations would instead be upstairs.

Although Ms. Burden, 62, clearly relishes her job, one she said she coveted for decades, her path to it was not entirely straightforward. She was born to the elite: a descendant of John Jay, the first chief justice of the United States; her father, Stanley Mortimer, was an heir to the Standard Oil fortune, and her mother, Barbara Paley, known as Babe, was one of Truman Capote’s exalted swans. Her most recent detailed financial disclosure forms, filed in 2005, put her net worth at more than \$45 million, with the bulk of it reserved in trust for her children.

After an upbringing filled with cotillions, she married Carter Burden, a wealthy member of the Vanderbilt clan who was an aide to Senator [Robert F. Kennedy](#) and later became a city councilman.

Living at the Dakota on Central Park West, on the same floor as Jason Robards and Lauren Bacall, the couple had two children while Ms. Burden worked as a public school teacher in Harlem, but they divorced in 1972. Picking up her education again, Ms. Burden studied environmental science at Sarah Lawrence and was able to apply the quantitative analysis skills she learned after meeting Mr. Whyte, who hired her to study how New Yorkers used public spaces. That led to an epiphany that “this was how I could do public service, by shaping the city, by creating great public spaces,” she said.

She worked for the New York State Urban Development Corporation under Gov. Hugh L. Carey, then oversaw the planning of Battery Park City until her appointment to the [City Planning Commission](#) in 1990. Having moved to the Upper East Side, she got to know Mr. Bloomberg a bit running into him near their 79th Street homes, and through her long friendship with his close aide Patricia E. Harris, now a deputy mayor. When Mr. Bloomberg was considering his bid for mayor, Ms. Burden took him on a tour of areas she felt were ripe for review, like the Greenpoint-Williamsburg waterfront and Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn.

She quickly made a splash after being appointed planning commissioner by moving forward on huge rezoning efforts and insisting on more finely drawn designs for major projects.

But many developers, who, associates say, will not speak publicly for fear of jeopardizing their projects, complain that she is imperious and arbitrary, using her seat in government to dictate the angles at which their buildings sit in the skyline or to mandate the use of overpriced architects. Even some of her fans describe her as willful and single-minded, with her patrician bearing and impeccable manners obscuring what [Daniel L. Doctoroff](#), the deputy mayor for economic development and rebuilding, called a “velvet hammer.”

At a recent forum on urban planning, for instance, Ms. Burden portrayed herself as a champion of neighborhoods and of preserving the texture of blocks, but dismissed criticism of the Atlantic Yards development project as “nostalgic or infantile.” Ms. Burden’s comments were later criticized by Atlantic Yards opponents, who contend that the project is grossly out of scale with the low-rise streets surrounding it.

In many areas that now bear her stamp, advocates have welcomed Ms. Burden’s efforts. But there is still criticism that the administration has little interest in genuine community planning and that Ms. Burden focuses too intently on the microfibers of a plan and ignores larger threads in the urban fabric like transportation, schools or sewer capacity.

“She comes across as the Good Witch of the North: she’s patient, she’s understanding, she’s attractive, she appears to listen,” said Peter Gillespie, executive director of Neighbors Allied for Good Growth, a community advocacy group in north Brooklyn. “But if you look at the results of her waving the magic wand of this Greenpoint-Williamsburg rezoning, where residents have been displaced, viable manufacturing jobs have been lost” and the neighborhood overrun with construction projects, he continued, “she’s more like the Wicked Witch of the West.”

Ms. Burden acknowledges that zoning changes can create anxiety and dissatisfaction within communities, but defends the administration’s approach of maximizing growth on wide boulevards and near transportation hubs while preserving little-village character elsewhere. “It’s a citywide approach, but it’s never broad-brush,” she said, adding that she works to “overlay community perspective with citywide need.”

She is also unapologetic toward her critics in the real estate industry, rejecting outright the notion that high-end design costs too much.

The industry, she said, “should be celebrating” because “we have done more to advance economic development, allowed for more capacity, created more conditions for growth than any other administration has.”

In addition, planning experts and her supporters in the administration say, her focus on the small details adds up to a profound effect.

“The physical environment is absolutely essential and creates the kind of communities that make people want to invest in those communities,” Mr. Doctoroff said. “Some people disagree with the judgments, and that’s understandable, but I don’t think that you can object to having high standards.”

Ms. Burden’s work has allowed her to mostly escape the tag of socialite, although her name has remained a boldface staple of the society pages, especially through her associations with high-profile men including her second husband, Steve Ross of Time Warner, and her former companion, the talk show host Charlie Rose.

“The soft-spoken demeanor is a terrific foil for a will of steel,” said Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban planning at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at [New York University](#), who is close to the administration. “There’s very few people who combine her looks and brains and know-how in the same package.”

But there is also her thoroughness, boosters say, a trait that has become a hallmark of her current role, where she said she requires that all the commissioners visit the entire site of any rezoning before voting on it.

As a result, weekends often find her jumping into her car to visit the communities where the commission is proposing changes.

“That’s the hardest thing about the job is learning every block,” she said. “Every one of those 65 rezonings, every one, I know them all. And I don’t think you should be allowed to propose reshaping a community unless you know it.”