

Going the Extra Mile, er, Kilometer

When it comes to our urban design and customs, it behooves Chicago to look at the ways of the world

As the ugly American stereotype had it, our condescending, polyester-clad tourists would invariably ask an English or French shopkeeper, "How much is that in real money?" Perhaps a combination of the relative beating that the dollar has taken in world markets in recent years and better manners that come from more exposure has lessened that smugness.

But as we increase our foreign travel, depend more heavily on imported goods to maintain our lifestyles—(as a percent of gross domestic product, imports have tripled in the last 40 years)—and intend to compete for one of the ultimate international prizes (being the host city for the Olympics), perhaps we should realize that tourists, business folks and public officials from abroad are likely to make Chicago a destination in the future.

Thus we should tweak our urban landscape modestly to accommodate other people's cultural backgrounds and commercial expectations. This would complement our walkways, drinking fountains, door latches and other features modified to accommodate the disabled and an aging population. It is "neighborly," prudent public policy and very much in our own economic self-interest.

Much of what we as Americans do may be refreshingly eccentric and admirable, depending on one's definition of what constitutes a civilized society. But we value our freedom to eat on the run and have dinner, with iced drinks and free refills, anytime we want (not

only after 7:30 p.m. as is customary in European and South American countries). Foreigners have certainly endorsed some of our habits—Hollywood, denim and even McDonald's.

Speaking of 7:30 p.m., perhaps it's time for us to switch to a 24-hour clock for other than just military coordination and medical treatments. The United States and most of Canada are clearly outliers here; for the rest of the world, a "24-hour day" doesn't mean 12 hours twice.

We will prefer our weather in Fahrenheit rather than in Celsius, but there is an easy fix—just display both, as some signs in public spaces already do, and add the time in the 24-hour designation while we're at it. We will likely keep buying our gas by the gallon, reporting our height in inches and weighing ourselves in pounds, though given our expanding girths, we might want to shift to kilograms and get the pleasure of only weighing 90 kilograms instead of 200 pounds.

We're unlikely to adopt the metric system completely, "1st down

and 10 yards to go" being one major deterrent. However, in other areas we seem to have adapted without much difficulty—2-liter soda bottles and the 100-meter and 400-meter events in swimming and track. In fact, about the only mile measurements today are on highway and marathon markers.

In comparison with other lands, major international airports in this country, including O'Hare, display little information nor make

many announcements in foreign languages. Pity the non-English speaker once the plane lands. There and in public spaces in the central city, some acknowledgement of others' tongues might be *de rigueur*.

Some peculiarities may have a certain charm, like what constitutes "the first floor" (or "the first floor up" in Chicago vs. Rio vs. Paris) or the restaurant tip being discretionary here versus mandatory most everywhere else. And these are not

show-stoppers. Differences in clothing sizes may not matter much, plus you can usually try on items.

As a concession to others' concerns about our cultural and economic imperialist tendencies, perhaps we could abandon our insistence on mm/dd/yyyy record keeping and move to dd/mm/yyyy, thus avoiding the confusion over whether 7-9-09 is the 7th of September or the 9th of July. Then we could also print our calendars Mon-Sun instead of Sun-Sat.

Globalization, a term that is only 20 years old, will continue to produce and require more standardization. There are fewer currencies all the time (and 80 percent of the world's transactions now take place in one of just four—the dollar, euro, yen or yuan). We take for granted being able to travel from Illinois to Wisconsin without having to change currencies, something of which Europeans are just beginning to reap the benefits.

The explosion in virtually all aspects of international trade has a lot to do with the efficiencies inherent in using one language, and in science and business, English has emerged as that language. And it isn't the cheap labor in India that drives commerce between here and there; American workers have always earned more (as a result of higher productivity). It's the tremendous drop in transportation and communications costs. That phone-center call to/from Bangalore is now virtually free.

So as we move into the second decade of this century, we should not overlook the tremendous potential gains and efficiencies at our doorstep as we review and plan our urban landscape, architecture, design and signage. As an emerging world cultural and commercial center, it behooves Chicago to think globally when acting locally. □

