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300 N. Zeeb Road
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Places is indexed in the Architectural Periodical Index, Art Abstracts, the Art and Humanities Citation Index, the Art Index, the Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals, the Design and Applied Arts Index, and Uncover.

Subscription Information
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Individual subscriber: \$45 U.S., (\$75 for six issues), \$55 Canada (\$90 for six issues), \$65 elsewhere (\$110 for six issues). Add \$15 for airmail (outside U.S. and Canada).

Institutional subscriber: \$75 U.S., \$85 Canada, \$95 elsewhere. Add \$15 per copy for airmail (outside U.S. and Canada).

Single copies, \$15 (Canada, \$18). Add \$3 per copy for postage and handling; add \$15 per copy for airmail (outside U.S. and Canada).

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P.O. Box 1897, Lawrence, KS 66044-8897

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Pratt Institute
University of California, Berkeley
College of Environmental Design
ISSN 0731-0455 Made in USA
www.places-journal.org

Places: Forum of Design for the Public Realm

18.2 Media and the City



Volume 18, No. 2
\$15 US \$18 CA
Summer 2006

PLACES

Places: Forum of Design for the Public Realm
Volume 18, Number 2 2006 www.places-journal.org

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The State of City Planning Today and Its Relation to City Planning Education

Allan B. Jacobs

I am mightily concerned about the state of the city planning field today, particularly in large U.S. cities, and the nature of the educational programs from which city planners come.

City planning, to me as a practicing professional and educator in the field, has always been about determining what should go where, why, how to get it there, and when. Its focus is on the physical environment of places—meeting the needs and aspirations of people who live and work in a city (or metropolitan area), consistent with the sustainable needs of the natural environment. This is not to suggest that socioeconomic needs are unimportant, or that they are less important than physical ones. But socioeconomic objectives can also be addressed through social or economic planning. To be sure, the objective of city planning is to achieve a variety of physical and social objectives; for example, a path or a street is planned and located to help people get from place to place because there are good social and economic reasons for them to do so. However, the principal achievement of city planning should be the location and design of the path in relation to other possible paths and to the uses of land, considering a multitude of physical and social concerns.

Perhaps the sharpest justification for my admittedly limited definition can be found in the requirements or expectations found in legislation enabling the establishment of city planning departments in U.S. cities and states, or requiring that such work be done.¹ That legislation most often deals with the what, where, why, how and when of city development. Another recent definition of what city planners are expected to do may be found in the job description for the new Chief Planner of Boston: "...to bring into focus the interrelated

issues and decisions around land use, built form, the public realm, the environment, community development, infrastructure and transportation that shape Boston, and relate these issues to the larger strategic goals."

In a large city, city planning, as so defined, may be extraordinarily difficult. To be effective and relevant, it must work at three physical and three time scales—and do so simultaneously. The physical scales are the city as a whole, the neighborhood or district, and the individual project or site. The time scales are long range, which is anything longer than four years (the attention span of an elected official); short range, which is any problem or opportunity that can be solved or achieved within one year of being identified or proposed; and middle range, which involves things that can be achieved in one to four years.

The San Francisco General Plan

One of my most important encounters with these issues (which now seems ages ago) was redoing the San Francisco General Plan when I was that city's planning director. This was, of course, both a long-range activity and one with a citywide (and beyond) physical scale. The work took place between 1967 and 1975—slowly, piece by piece, because there weren't funds to do it any other way. It was done by departmental staff. Most notable of the accomplishments, we thought then, were its Transportation Plan, Urban Design Plan, Recreation and Open Space Plan, and Housing Plan.

The San Francisco Urban Design Plan, completed in 1971, was apparently the first of its type, and became very well known and copied. It also became the basis for citywide legislation concerning building height and bulk, view corridors, historic preservation, shadow and light controls, and much more.

When presented, it was enormously popular and respected. People carried it into meetings, quoting it. They challenged staff and elected officials to make its proposals real; and we did indeed try. It was extremely influential for about 25 years. The plan contained four straightforward objectives, many urban form policies appropriate for San Francisco, and many principles (truths, if you will) about how to develop appropriately in San Francisco. The plan and its principles still seem, to these eyes, appropriate, and deserve continued

The San Francisco Urban Design Plan of

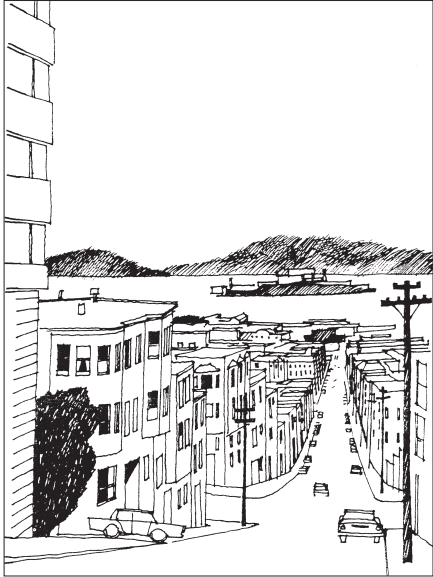
1972 followed each of its objectives with a series of "principles," urban design truths for the city many of which could be and would be translated into legislation or design guidelines by the city and private developers alike. A sampling of the principles is shown here.

1. Landscaped pathways can visually and functionally link larger open spaces to neighborhoods.
2. Street rights-of-way on hills too steep for cars or not needed for traffic are useless for people if covered with concrete. They can be modified to provide useful and attractive open space.
3. Building siting and massing with respect to street pattern influence the quality of views from street space. 3a: Tall buildings on the tops of hills allow clear views down streets. 3b: Tall buildings on slopes of hills severely restrict views from above.
4. Larger taller buildings can blend pleasantly with small-scaled areas if the change in scale is not excessive and if their form or surface pattern is articulated to reflect existing scale.
5. Visually strong buildings which contrast severely with their surroundings impair the character of the area.
6. Bulky buildings that intrude upon or block important views of the Bay, Ocean or other significant citywide focal points are particularly disruptive.

The drawings are by Tom Aidala.



1.



3a.



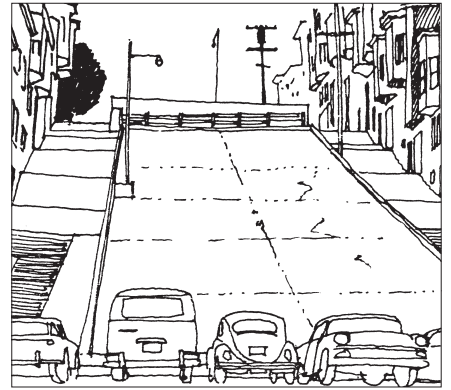
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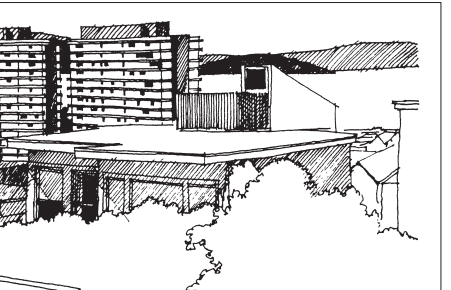
2a.



2b.



4.



consideration by city leaders and the general public.

It is fair to say, I think, that the Urban Design Plan was everything that one could have hoped for—again, for about 25 years. It spawned other plans, like the downtown plan which came later, and the sun protection and wind controls, and even the fine Mission Bay Plan, by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, which is now largely discarded.

It is also important to recall that the Transportation Plan (together with the Urban Design Plan) called for removal of the Embarcadero and Central Freeways. Later studies of the former even showed how this could be done—an example of detailed project planning fitting into a general plan structure. Sure, it took the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 to turn long-range ideal into short-term reality; but the physical plans were there, to be followed. It is important, sometimes, to give luck a chance.

Octavia Boulevard, recently completed, is another consequence, in part, of the Transportation Plan. As explained in greater detail elsewhere in this issue, Elizabeth Macdonald and I were fortunate to be chosen as designers for this replacement to a section of the Central Freeway.

Loss of Will

This brings me to the city planning field as I experience it today, and to the nature of the city planning education—highly related topics.² At this moment it is difficult to look positively at either the state of city planning in the U.S. or the nature of the education received by young people who would like to be city planners.

Looking back, a good place to start, might be the dropping of the word “city” or “urban” from what had always been “city planning” or “urban

planning.” The American Planning Association did this years ago, to its discredit. Teaching faculties, too, are uncomfortable with the word combination, tending to prefer “planning” alone to describe what they do. A case can be made that “urban design” as we know it today is not much more than a recent invention by some, including myself, to justify a concentration on what city planning once was, and what “planning” alone is not. Decisions such as those both reflect and foreshadow the nature of the field.

To be more current, if I am invited to a U.S. city, to consult, or talk with a downtown or other interest group, the city planning department is often absent. And in too many large cities, if I ask how important the city planning department is, or how important the city planning function is to development decision-making—or, better, whether the department is a leading, positive force in the community in guiding and deciding the nature of development—the answer is likely to be “not very important.”

Evidence of this weakness may usually also be found in terms of the low regard with which the city’s general plan is held. Too often this document is little more than an assemblage of vague motherhood words that can be interpreted in many ways, rather than a clear driving force behind public development and zoning (supposedly the control of land uses and private development to protect the health, safety and welfare of the community). The result is a civic vision that is easily changeable in the face of ad hoc development pressures, because the field has fallen into the habit of case-by-case zoning decisions (via conditional-use permits and so-called design guidelines), through which large-scale developers can easily bring political pressure to get what they want.

Then, too, it is all too common for cities to engage in public-private partnership redevelopment projects that essentially bypass adopted plans in favor of whatever large-scale development seems most popular at the moment. Something called “strategic planning” is deemed more pragmatic and timely than general planning. If city planners do have a strong position on a particular matter—and “if” is a big question here—too often, when the dust settles, they lose.

One can certainly find wonderful, usually young, idealistic people on public city planning staffs. My partner Elizabeth Macdonald and I are always pleasantly surprised by the many fine, able professionals in the San Francisco Department of City Planning. But their voices are soft, generally muffled by the managers above them. There have been far too many examples in recent years of city planning directors who are not city planning professionals, but “administrators” who really don’t know (and maybe don’t care about) the physical-social consequences of the large projects they approve.

The skill of engaging in and leading citizen participation may be found in many city planning staffs, as are research capabilities. But too often the emphasis is on how to make future decisions, not necessarily on making them or on developing creative ways to achieve them. Citizen participation is dandy, but it is one of many methods of doing plans. It is not necessarily an end in itself, and it certainly does not assure a “right” answer.³

Changed Circumstances

In any dark period there is light. We had the good fortune, in 2003, to attend and speak at the New Urbanism conference in Washington. What was most impressive were the many young professionals full of concern

and positive enthusiasm for the physical arrangement of urban places, the places where they work. These people were the equivalents of the young and not-so-young professionals one saw at American Institute of City Planning meetings decades ago. Maybe they are the same people. Whether one agrees with the tenets of New Urbanism or not, it is noteworthy and positive to see it attracts people who want to make a difference.

There are also always exceptions. Portland would seem to be one of them—a wonderful city, with slow, steady, constant, rational achievements, driven, it seems, as much by an involved citizenry as by its leaders and planners. Charleston, South Carolina, has had noted city planning accomplishments for many years, the good work being associated with the vision of Mayor Joe Riley, a true city planner. Likewise, the good things happening in Chicago seem very much associated with Mayor Daley. In Vancouver, British Columbia, the extensive and notable planning accomplishments are driven by a superb professional staff.

To be sure, not all problems with city planning lie with the planners. In the U.S. today, for a variety of reasons, phrases like “public good” have fallen from grace. The U.S., it seems, is in one of our many periods of largely uncontrolled capitalism, a form of religion in which it is believed that no controls (or plans) are best, and that unhampered individual decisions by owners and developers will produce the best, most exciting cities.

An immensely conservative ideology has penetrated to local government. This is a “those who have, get more” game. It seems the historic lessons of overbuilding and mean building, lessons of the industrial revolution of the 1800s and of the

Great Depression of the 1930s, will have to be learned again. But not now. For now, the so-called planners, in the field and in the academies, remain silent, either meek or actually believing the pragmatic, capitalist line.

Having worked as a consultant to public city planning departments, I am also continually surprised that the work is not done “in-house” by the professional staff. I rarely hired consultants when I worked in San Francisco. Why would I hire someone to do what I was trained to do and which was fun? Why shouldn’t we, the staff, have the fun? When asked why staffs don’t do the work themselves, the answer is usually that the professional-technical resources aren’t available, or that there is a need for prestigious consultants, or that staff is otherwise engaged: a pity. Personally, I believe that fear is also a reason. In our private practice, Elizabeth Macdonald and I always try to build local capacity; but that is not easily done when department budgets for advanced planning are slim and self-doubt is high. However, it is the lack of professional expertise that catches my attention most and which brings my thoughts to the education of city planners.

The heart of the problem, I believe, is that so many people who teach city planning in university graduate programs are nonprofessionals. They may tell the world and themselves that they are, but few have worked in public departments or consulting firms that prepare city plans for the public. Neither have they actually prepared a general plan, a neighborhood plan, or a project plan in any capacity, or are they professionally credentialed in architecture, landscape architecture, or for that matter, city planning.⁴ Rather than being professionals, those who teach are overwhelmingly academics, holders of

Ph.D. degrees, whose life experience has been, largely, in universities. They call themselves professionals when it suits them to do so.

Changed Priorities

If I’m right, how did the situation come to be?

Generally, in the 1950s and 1960s, there was an expansion of city planning programs at U.S. universities, many fashioned after programs at Harvard, MIT, Cornell, and the University of California at Berkeley. Those early programs—and the new ones, by and large—were peopled by professionals who were intent on teaching city planning as a profession. More often than not, the departments were housed in schools or colleges of architecture or environmental design, almost always with faculties concerned with physical environments.

Early on, these city planning departments concluded that all of their faculty members need not have degrees in one of the design-related professions. They argued that the field was a multidisciplinary one, and so might be its teachers—a reasonable conclusion. But in the years that followed they also established and developed their own doctorate programs. In part this decision was made to exist, to hold their own in their universities, to show that they were as knowing and disciplined as other faculties in their institutions. In part it also reflected the reality that some of their new faculty members came from long-established academic fields such as sociology or economics or geography, and the new faculty would have to meet the academic standards in those fields. But it was also due in part to a desire by city planning departments for status—for themselves and for the field.

It takes no great insight to see what happened once the doctorate

programs were in place: newly minted Ph.D.s, mostly trained in the social sciences, sought and found academic positions. They were not particularly comfortable teaching classes that dealt with physical planning, and certainly not with urban design. Fewer and fewer had any undergraduate or professional design experience. As a consequence, studio courses and place-making workshops, a mainstay of physical planning, either weren't taught or were taught poorly—or, they were called studio classes but really were not. In many schools, studio classes even ceased to be required.

Over time, since universities admit students with whom they are most comfortable, the emphasis changed overwhelmingly in admissions to master's degree programs from a design to a social-science orientation. At the same time, a Ph.D. became a requirement for teaching in most city planning departments, effectively cutting off design-oriented professionals from university positions. Once that scenario was recycled a few times the outcome was predictable: graduates at the master's level without much education in doing what enabling legislation says city planning is—and an emphasis on verbal policy, citizen participation techniques (void of doing plans), conflict resolution, and the like. At the same time, there was an increasing emphasis on “planning theory”—whatever that is—or, as academics in the field and at home in the universities do best, criticism of what others have done, loaded with citations to other academic work.

To a person like me, who considers himself a professional, the article in the Fall 2004 issue of the *Journal of Planning Education and Research* by Stiftel, Rukmana and Alam, purporting to deal with “Faculty Quality at U.S. Graduate Planning Schools,”

was disheartening in the extreme.⁵ Highly oriented toward statistics, it dealt primarily with publications in rarified academic journals (urban design journals don't count) and the numbers of citations authors could claim to each other's work. Yet, in a list of 53 authors with the most publications, I recognized only one person I would consider a professional city planner. The article studiously avoided anything about the quality of the professionals the schools produce, the quality of the students, or the education they received. In her last book, *Dark Age Ahead*, Jane Jacobs spoke of credentialing vs. education; this seems a prime example of that.⁶

In the late 1980s and 1990s, urban design, within city planning programs, began to appear, and, indeed, the subfield, or concentration, exists. But it is also true that the urban design concentration, if there is one, is often marginal (and treated as such) to the larger planning program(s).⁷

Given what I think explains the first evolution of the city planning field and city planning education, it comes as no surprise that at least one of the oldest and strongest university programs has faculty consider the teaching of professional city planning as being vocational training, in a very pejorative sense, and don't want to do that. One is led to wonder, then, why a professional master's degree program should continue to exist in such a university, let alone be associated with programs in architecture and landscape architecture.

The Future

What to do?

Perhaps nothing! Perhaps it is best to let matters take their course, without overt action by either the planning field or the academics. The field as represented in public agencies,

will plod along, with short spurts of energy here and there, but its people may largely become the experts in zoning, discussion-leading, and information retrieval and ordering: in short, the bureaucracy. Planning programs at universities might evolve clearly into centers for urban studies and policy. City planning—the what, where, when, how, and why—will come and go, driven by citizen groups for long periods or short, intense flares, depending on the city, the issues at stake, and people's concerns over how badly they are getting gored by capitalism run amok. Zoning commissions could replace planning commissions, and departments and planning staffs could become the targets of budget reductions as necessity dictates.

As for the education of city planners: if the faculties of existing programs are truly interested in planning policy that does not concentrate on (or largely excludes) the what, where, when, how and why; if they are uncomfortable with the word “city” or “urban” in front of “planning” and interested in socioeconomic theory and research, rather than in preparing professionals for public city planning (and perceive that activity as merely vocational training); then they should have the good manners to leave their associations with colleges or large departments that include architecture and/or landscape architecture and move to where they will be more comfortable—in any of a number of social science or public administration schools (in which, by the way, they will soon cease to exist, but that is another matter).

If this occurs, transportation planning, a subfield that has had positive influence in terms of humanizing streets and travel, might be forced from the planning programs, where they have done well, back into engineering

schools—and that might be problematic.

And what of the few urban designers—those marginal faculty, with or without Ph.D.s, who practice, teach, and do research on urban physical form issues and their relation to peoples' lives and to urban environmental responsibility? Generally, architecture departments are the wrong places for these people. That field is overwhelmingly concerned with the design of individual structures, not urban context, and not the natural environment or people in their environments.⁸ A more reasonable home would be within landscape architecture programs, with people concerned with space and the natural physical environment. The transformation, the move, would not be easy, and it would create another set of problems—not the least of which would be the required coursework and a professional culture that is overwhelmingly accommodating. But the effort, I believe, would pay off for the professional practice of city planning, for teaching and for research that would be helpful to professionals.

A better option might be to follow the model that has been put in place at the University of Pennsylvania. There, I gather, the practitioner, the professional city planner, has faculty status the equivalent of an academic. At Penn, studios, at the heart of professional education, have always been most rigorously taught. There is a tie, of course, to teaching at MIT. Alternatively, a well-defined interest organization, made up of members from many different professions, but with a well-defined and clear charter directed to the physical planning of urban communities might be established. This could well be an organization modeled after the Congress for the New Urbanism.

More optimistically for the field,

regardless of what the academy does or how the field chooses to define itself, perhaps the greatest hope lies in communities—cities, if you will—and in young people. In my experience, the actual residents of cities and neighborhoods—not all of them, but many—want some sense of improvement, of moving ahead, of problem-solving, and of the possibilities of living in healthy, safe, exciting, environmentally sustaining, well-populated urban contexts, a sense that together they are moving in positive directions. To these ends, they continually call for and require of their governments some kind of physical planning consistent with their social and economic needs. To me, it remains to be seen if the planning field as presently constituted will respond to those challenges better than it has in recent times. Clearly, I have serious doubts.

As for young people, I have, for more than thirty years at Penn and at the University of California, served on admissions committees and have read thousands of letters by people who give their reasons for applying. In my reading, overwhelmingly, their statements of purpose—with exceptions, of course—have remained the same: to help build and achieve better communities that are more egalitarian than the ones we have; that respect and use wisely natural resources; that, in short, strive for some utopian visions—many of which, but not all, evince a large element of concern for what should go where, why, how and when.

These people want to go out and to work in cities. If planning education could again become city planning education, and respond more directly and positively to these young people, the cities themselves and their city planning programs might rapidly become much better.

Notes

1. It is, by the way, amazing to me how often (when I ask them) that the members of a city planning staff, even its director, do not know what their charge is—what the enabling legislation or the city charter establishing their department and activity actually says they are supposed to do.
2. Since being a public city planner in San Francisco, I have gained a lot of experience as a city planning and urban design consultant and as a person involved in teaching. My thoughts, conclusions and concerns come from that experience and from discussions with other professionals and with people in the cities where I work. West Coast experience, particularly in and around San Francisco, colors my conclusions; but I am somewhat familiar with the East, the Southwest, Northwest, and other places. My concerns are not new, and they are not based on what professionals and academics might consider an objective, scientific foundation. Yet, they may coincide with other planners' experiences. Call them notes and meandering hypotheses, to be proven or disproved by future research—or more likely, by future events.
3. I am aware this sentence could get me booed out of some nice places.
4. Indeed, the university-credentialing arm of the American Planning Association recently put forth a proposal that would require at least some faculty members who teach city planning to have professional credentials. But the faculty at the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley, concerned with registration and credentialing matters, would hear none of it.
5. Bruce Stiftel, Deden Rukmana, and Bhuiyan Alam, "Faculty Quality at U.S. Graduate Planning Schools: A National Research Council-Style Study," *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (September 2004), pp. 6–22.
6. Jane Jacobs, *Dark Age Ahead* (New York: Random House, 2004).
7. Note that I do not precede "planning" here with either "urban" or "city."
8. I would love to be wrong about this, but fear that it is only in exceptional cases that urban physical planning and design can thrive for a long period in such settings. Generally, urban designers would be marginalized in such programs, and physical planning would be a hit-or-miss crapshoot.

Benjamin Clavan and
Raymond Lifchez

The Berkeley Prize: Those Who Make it Work

**berkeley
prize**

These Forum pages were produced under agreement between the Design History Foundation and the Berkeley Prize for Undergraduate Design Excellence.

For the archives of the prize, more information on past prize winners, essays on the social art of architecture, and fuller biographies of all of the reviewers and past jurors, see www.berkeleyprize.org. Also see *Places 17.1* (Spring 2005), "Competing to Learn: The Berkeley Prize and the Social Art of Architecture," for a history of the prize and a description of the 2004 awards cycle.

Benjamin Clavan, Ph.D. is an architect who has been in private practice in the Los Angeles area for 25 years. Raymond Lifchez is a Professor of Architecture at U.C. Berkeley and co-founder of the Berkeley Prize.

Now in its ninth year, the international Berkeley Prize for Undergraduate Design Excellence promotes and explores the social art of architecture. Open to undergraduate architecture majors (or teams of students in allied studies led by architecture students), the prize annually consists of two parts: a highly structured essay competition based on a given question, and a more open-ended competition for a travel fellowship for semifinalists in the essay competition.

In 2006 the Berkeley Prize focused on the topic of Children and the City. A total of 111 entries represented 127 students from 28 countries and 38 schools of architecture. The essay prize winner was Ms. Qurratulain Poonawala, Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi, Pakistan. The travel fellowship was won by Mr. Andrew Amara, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda.

This year's travel fellowship included airfare and a three-week stipend to attend and participate in the third United Nations Habitat World Urban Forum in Vancouver, British Columbia. While there, the winner also participated in two major prearranged activities: the GUiC+10 event/workshop, sponsored by the Growing Up In Cities Program, to which the 2006 Berkeley Prize is dedicated; and the 2006 Global Studio and Global Studio Design Workshop, an international colloquium concerning specific sites and projects in Vancouver.

The full text of the winning essays and more information on the travel fellowship are available at www.berkeleyprize.org

One of the greatest rewards of the Berkeley Prize is participating in the community of thinkers and scholars who contribute time and

effort to judging its finalists. This gathering of reviewers has set the tone and helped determine the high level of response—and high level of accomplishment—the prize has so far generated. Each year every first-stage 500-word proposal and second-stage 2,500-word essay are read online in their entirety by at least three reviewers. The decision of the reviewers is automatically tabulated and final. An international jury of experts in the specific question then finally decides the prize winners.

The reviewers are a varied group, ranging from academics in the field of architecture, to lawyers, filmmakers, past student winners, and the authors of this Forum. In an effort to recognize their contribution and highlight some of the ways they are contributing to a deeper understanding of the social art of architecture, we publish a list of them here, with short notes on their backgrounds. We also highlight the work of several to show the range and breadth of the reviewers' teaching and thinking, and the vision they bring to the understanding of architecture as a social art.

Berkeley Prize Reviewers

Elaine Addison is a writer, educator, mother, and documentary filmmaker who combines all these talents as an international childcare expert. She is author of *Miss Poppy's Guide to Raising Perfectly Happy Children* and co-founder of *Family Life* magazine. Her experience ranges from teaching underprivileged children in inner-city schools, to caring for the children of world leaders and Hollywood stars, to working with children living in tents in Cambodia.

Stanford Anderson is an architect, Professor of History and Architecture, and Head of the Department of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts. He is the author of *Peter Behrens: A New Architecture for the Twentieth Century*.

Paul Broches, FAIA, has been a partner at Mitchell/Giurgola Architects in New York since 1980, where he has led college and university master-planning efforts. As a National Board Member and Chair of the New York Chapter of Architects Designers and Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR), he organized a forum on the topic of schools as building blocks for community—a concept now being applied by ADPSR in the rebuilding of post-Katrina New Orleans.

John Cary is Executive Director of Public Architecture, a nonprofit public-interest design firm based in San Francisco. He is also co-founder of ArchVoices, a nonprofit organization and think-tank focused on architectural education and training.

Roddy Creedon is a Lecturer in the Department of Architecture at U.C. Berkeley, where he teaches design. He is a Member of the Arcus Endowment Committee, which supports a wide range of critical activities, including the relationship between gender, sexuality, and the built environment. He is a principal of the award-winning firm Allied Architecture and Design.

C. Greig Cryslar, Ph.D., teaches courses in architectural theory and criticism and design theories and methods in the Department of Architecture at UC Berkeley. With Stephen Cairns, Hilde Heynen,



Leslie Van Duzer Design Fundamentals I

This project grew out of my belief that it is never too early for architecture students to engage design as a social and political act. In the Spring of 2006 small teams of pre-architecture students at the University of Minnesota were assigned to nonprofit organizations with established ties to the university. In all, there were forty teams matched with twenty different organizations, ranging from a battered women's shelter to a youth farming program.

Laurel Hirt, the University's Service-Learning and Community Involvement Director, was heroic in identifying appropriate organizations and projects, and invaluable for managing the student-client relationships throughout the semester. The students worked independently with their organizations, clarifying the project programs and budgets (often nonexistent), agreeing on expectations, and reviewing their design proposals.

In parallel, the student teams met with their teaching assistants in the school for interim design reviews. Their projects included educational board games, a parade float, a bicycle-drawn garden cart, interior renovations, display boards, pamphlets, and event planning for fundraisers.

Through this assignment, the students gained experience working with real clients with real needs and extremely tight budgets. In some cases, they demonstrated tremendous resourcefulness, including dumpster-diving for recycled materials and pounding the pavement for donations. The students experienced the joys and hardships of working in teams, and perhaps most importantly, learned the value of using their design skills in the service of others. We are making plans to ramp up this effort in the fall to take on still more ambitious projects.

Above: Cart for the Youth Farm and Market Program, designed by Morgan Hertzfeld, Mark Zeitler, and Douglas Ziebell.



Thomas A. Dutton Agit-Prop

Since 1996 the Department of Architecture and Interior Design at Miami University of Ohio has engaged a series of design/build and agit-prop projects in close collaboration with groups of the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood in Cincinnati.

An historical area adjacent to Cincinnati's central business district, Over-the-Rhine suffers the classic problems of many poor, inner-city neighborhoods, including homelessness, segregation, building abandonment, and unemployment and underemployment. The median household income for Over-the-Rhine is approximately \$8,000.

Our design/build work helps renovate the neighborhood's historic housing stock. We work collaboratively with Over-the-Rhine Housing Community Housing—a housing development organization founded to alleviate shelter poverty—to help bring buildings back into use.

Our agit-prop projects bring community artists and leaders together to build artistic installations that “agitate” and “propagate”

points of view with regard to the neighborhood's history and political consciousness. Negotiating a line between pedagogy and aesthetics, our agit-pros challenge people to share experiences that expose how the political system works and where they are situated in it.

The results of our collaboration with institutions and leaders of Over-the-Rhine have been so positive that Miami University's School of Fine Arts established the center for Community Engagement in Over-the-Rhine. The Center provides a setting for faculty and students from a variety of disciplines to work collaboratively with neighborhood organizations and residents on common projects for the community's cultural and economic advancement.

Above: This agit-prop commemorates the bulldozing of a single-room-occupancy hotel for upscale housing. Adjacent to the demolition site in a prominent downtown park, five life-sized silhouettes critique the dominant culture's gaze that looks right through homeless people as if they are invisible. Suspended within the absence was text and poetry by the former SRO residents. Plaques placed on the ground throughout the park raised questions about the control of land and a community's right to self-determination.

and Sibel Bozdogan, he is co-editor of the planned *Handbook of Architectural Theory*. He is also Program Director of the Arcus Endowment at U.C. Berkeley and has extensive experience in professional practice in Canada and the U.K.

Kim Dovey, Ph.D., is a Professor of Architecture and Urban Design and Head of Architecture at the University of Melbourne. He has published widely on social issues in architecture and urban design, including *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*, and *Fluid City*.

Thomas A. Dutton is an architect and Professor of Architecture and Interior Design at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. He is co-editor (with Lian Hurst Mann) of *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices*, and he is editor of *Voices in Architectural Education: Cultural Politics and Pedagogy*.

Lynne Elizabeth is director of New Village Press, the publishing arm of Architects, Designers and Planners for Social Responsibility. New Village is the first publisher to specialize in grassroots community building and community cultural development—“the good news” of social change. She is also co-editor of *Alternative Construction: Contemporary Natural Building Methods*, and the forthcoming *Works of Heart: Building Village through the Arts*.

Roberta M. Feldman, Ph.D., is a Professor of Architecture and Co-Director of the City Design Center, College of Architecture and the Arts, University of Illinois at Chicago. She is editor of the pioneering Internet catalog, *Design Matters: Best Practices in Affordable Housing*, and curator of the exhibit and editor of the forthcoming *The Chicago Greystone in Historic North Lawndale*.

Thomas Gensheimer is a Professor of Architectural History at the Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, Georgia, where he specializes in African and Islamic architecture and urbanism. He has published on globalization and the urban history of the East African coast.

Ann Gilkerson, Ph.D., has taught the history of architecture at Harvard, the Rhode Island School of Design, the U.C. Davis, and Oberlin College. Her

primary interest is the emergence of modernism in American architecture.

Zachary Heiden is a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union, Portland, Maine. He has advocated for a jurisprudence based on respect for human dignity, and his scholarship has touched on issues of home design in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the use of public land by religious minorities.

Lance Hosey, an architect, recently founded ATMO/Atelier Modern, a Washington-based design enterprise focused on multidisciplinary collaboration and environmental innovation. His work has been featured in *Metropolis* magazine's "Next Generation" series, and in *Architectural Record*'s "Emerging Architect" series. With Kira Gould, he is co-author of *Women in Green: Voices of Sustainable*.

Michael Keniger is the Executive Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, Physical Sciences and Architecture, and Professor of Architecture at The University of Queensland. He also holds the advisory role of Queensland Government Architect. He has written and lectured extensively on contemporary architecture and urbanism in Australia. He is a Life Fellow and Past President of the Queensland Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and was Queensland Architect of the Year in 1998.

Thomas-Bernard Kenniff won First Prize in the 2002 Berkeley Prize competition with an essay entitled "The Clean Street Paradox" which was subsequently published in *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly* (Cambridge University Press). He has worked in architectural offices in Montreal, San Francisco, Barcelona and Toronto.

Peter Liang is a design-build architect in Oakland, California. His work, casually titled "Greater Than or Equal to 2," explores and celebrates collaboration in architecture from concept to construction. Peter now builds shed-stairs, raises houses, designs big doors, and generally over-thinks many projects in the East Bay.

Christine Macy is a Professor of Architectural Design and History, and Acting Director, at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She is a

Paul Broches A Gentle Push toward Design for Everyone

During good times and bad, design remains a critical restorative tool to help mediate the strains between human beings and the primordial "man v. nature." This is the platform for architecture as a social art.

The basic building block is shelter. Like the Inuit igloo, it is also the touchstone for a people's cultural heritage. When people bring their spirit, art and craft to built form, shelter becomes home.

Each of us has a natural inclination to create personal, private spaces—intimate surroundings in which we feel protected and connected to what is most meaningful to us.

Once there are several dwellings side by side, there is community and a hierarchy of structures that become political and social tools. Individual buildings can become monumental symbols of authority, culture, or more innocently, the built fabric of community.

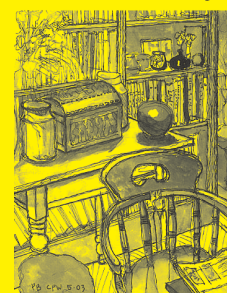
When the elements that make up the communal fabric form an organic whole like the mythical Tower of Babel, we experience a sense of order. Architecture can mediate between the individual and the larger community and create places for civic delight.

A remarkably simple example is a raised platform on an otherwise undefined beach in Bombay. It creates place and a civic alliance between object and desire. Left to their own devices, when people can control their environment, they prove time and again their innate understanding of the concept of architecture for everyone.

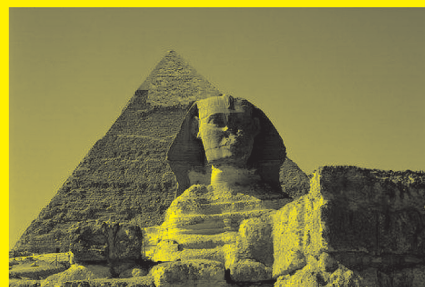
These simple concepts are the point of departure for my work as a teacher, critic and designer.



Inuit Igloo



A Private Place



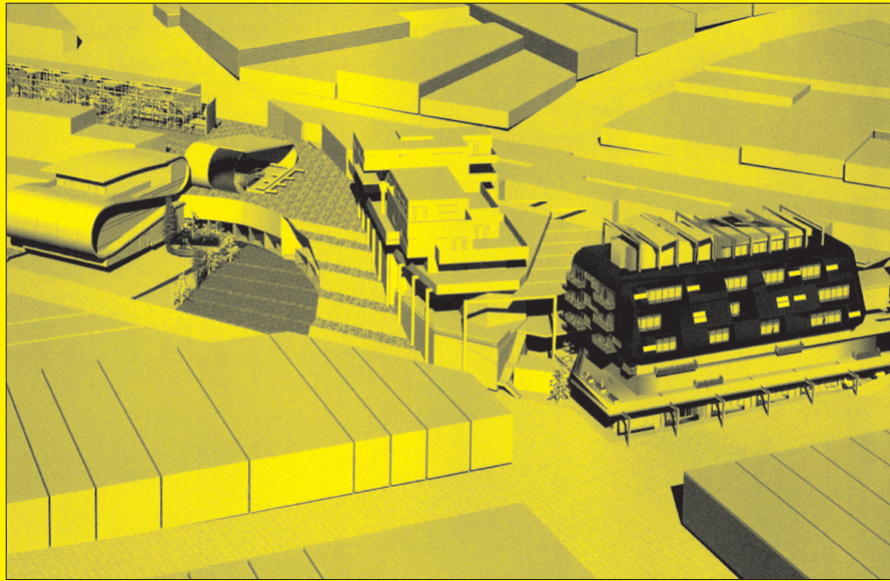
The Great Pyramid



Tower of Babel



Chowpatty Beach, Bombay



Kim Dovey Reinventing the Suburbs

Public land attached to suburban railway stations presents opportunities for reinvention of the suburbs with higher levels of social and environmental sustainability. Yet such sites are often nestled inside residential areas that are fiercely defended against change. An urban design studio I conducted at the University of Melbourne in 2005 developed visions for just such a site incorporating residential, community, commercial and retail uses together with a revamped railway station and public open space.

Surrey Hills railway station, in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, sits on a 2-hectare parcel adjacent to a small shopping strip. The surrounding neighborhood is composed of mostly detached housing of one to two stories, ranging from Victorian to contemporary styles.

Students were invited to reinvent the image and identity of the place. There was a lot of analysis of the existing morphology and everyday life;

some students went into the neighborhood for one-on-one interactions with the local residents.

It was agreed that the social prospect was a more walkable neighborhood with more amenities, better public space, higher use of public transport, and a greater variety of housing options. Five schemes were produced and presented to a public meeting of the residents with a lively discussion that was broadcast on local radio. The process and ideas seemed to broaden the ways of thinking about the issue for the residents, who are mostly locked into a not-in-my-back-yard attitude.

The fact that it was students presenting proposals was significant: residents seemed more willing to engage with a wider range of ideas because there was no imminent political risk of actual building.

Above: Scheme by Catherine Collins, Mark Greenwood, Lachlan Boyd, Brad Manser, and Michael Barraclough. A new public open space that connects to existing community uses that are framed by a grand stairway that climbs over the station, lined with cafes and public uses.

co-partner in FILUM, a research-based architectural practice focusing on the design of ephemeral architecture and the form-finding and fabrication of tensile structures. She is the co-author of *Architecture and Nature: Creating the American Landscape*, and is currently completing a visual history of dams in the United States.

John Q. McDonald is an astronomer and spacecraft flight engineer at the U.C. Berkeley. For two years, he was a student in writing seminars at Berkeley's Department of Architecture. He is a landscape painter and author who has published writings that interweave memoir and the built environment.

Keith Mitnick is an Associate Professor of Architecture at the University of Michigan. He has been Burnham Prize Fellow at the American Academy in Rome, and Sanders Fellow at the University of Michigan. He has practiced in Berkeley and San Francisco, and in 2004 he was awarded the Young Architects Award by the Architecture League of New York.

Jason Miller is a past Secretary for the Berkeley Prize. Until recently a U.C. Berkeley Architectural Visual Resources Librarian, he recently left the university to devote his professional life to designing, building, and rigging sailing yachts.

Angela Nkya won the 2004 Berkeley Prize for her essay "At Home in the City." She studied at Iowa State University, and currently works for Gillis and Associates, Architects, in Costa Mesa, California.

Maire O'Neill, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at Montana State University, Bozeman, where she has taught since 1990. She is an architect whose research focuses on haptic experience in understanding space and place. Currently she is serving on the Montana Committee for the Humanities Speakers Bureau.

Adriano Pupilli won the 2004 Berkeley Prize travel fellowship to Barcelona for his essay "Paper House: Self-Help and Waste Reuse towards Affordable, Sustainable and People Empowering Architecture." He studied at the University of Sydney, Australia, and is currently doing environmental planning in Papua New Guinea.

Scot Thrane Refsland, Ph.D., is the founder of Red Clay Studios, Seattle. He has won awards for his digital media installations and performances in Australia and Japan; he is a Visiting Fellow in Computer Arts, Abertay University, Dundee, Scotland; and he is the designer/programmer for the Berkeley Prize website.

Hadas Rix is a senior student at the Israel Institute of Technology whose major interest is green architecture and socially responsive planning. She is the winner of the 2005 Berkeley Prize travel fellowship to Istanbul, and received honorary mention for her participation in "Concrete Thinking for a Sustainable World"—a 2005-06 ACSA design competition.

Daves Rossell, Ph.D., is a Professor of Architectural History at the Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, Georgia, where he specializes in American architecture and urbanism, cultural landscape, and the vernacular. He is Chair of the Chatham County Historic Preservation Commission, and Director of the Vernacular Architecture Forum 2007 Annual Meeting. Rossell is co-editor of an upcoming book *Commemoration and the American City* with the University of Virginia Press.

Ananya Roy is an Associate Professor in the Department of City and Regional Planning at U.C. Berkeley where she chairs the undergraduate major in Urban Studies. She is also Associate Dean of International and Area Studies for the university. She is the author of the book, *City Requiem, Calcutta: Gender and the Politics of Poverty*, and is currently working on a new book, *Poverty Experts: The Production of Truth in the New Global Order*. In 2006 she received U.C. Berkeley's Distinguished Teaching Award.

David Salazar conducted his architectural training at U.C. Berkeley and London's Architectural Association. He also received Master's degrees in Project Management and Real Estate Development from Harvard and Columbia Universities. His current work focuses on implementing green building practices in New York City with corporate developers.

Magda Saura is an architect, art historian, and Professor of Architecture at the Universitat Polytechnica de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain. She advises the Officer of Cultural Affairs of Catalonia on social and historic preservation policies; she has led the master planning team for the Greco-Roman archeological site of Empuries, Spain; and she built a promenade for the Barcelona 1992 Olympic Games. Her publications include *Pobles Catalans/Catalan Villages* (Barcelona, 1997).

Anthony W. (Tony) Schuman is Graduate Program Director and an Associate Professor at the New Jersey School of Architecture (NJIT) and a past president of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA). His articles on housing design and urban development have appeared in ten books and numerous scholarly journals and conference proceedings. He serves on the Montclair (NJ) Housing Commission and several community development organizations in Newark.

Rafi Segal, architect, has received several prizes and awards for his work among them the Israeli Ministry of Culture Young Artist award (1996) and the Israel Architects Association Young Architect award (2001). His career has included teaching the Diploma studio at the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning in the Technion, and design studios at Princeton University School of Architecture.

Murray Silverstein is a partner in the architectural firm Jacobson Silverstein Winslow/Degenhardt, Berkeley, California. He is co-author of four books on architecture, including *A Pattern Language*, and *Patterns of Home: The Ten Essentials of Enduring Design*. He recently published his first volume of poetry, *Any Old Wolf*.

Philip Tidwell received First Prize in the 2003 Berkeley Prize Essay Competition. In 2004 he was selected for a two year appointment as a Junior Fellow to the EVA Forum for Business and Policy in Helsinki and was a founding member of the New York-based Urban Research Group (URGe), a non-profit organization dedicated to architectural design and research in global cities. Currently, Philip lives in Helsinki where he is the recipient of an American Fulbright grant for the study of contemporary Finnish architecture and building technology.

Leslie Van Duzer is an Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Minnesota. She has been awarded numerous grants and fellowships, including a 2006-2007 Dayton Hudson Faculty Fellowship. She has published three books in collaboration with Kent Kleinman, and is currently working on two more: *Adolf Loos in the Czech Lands*, and *Architects of Illusion* (working title).

Keith Wilson is a Principal of Seaton/Wilson Architects and an Adjunct Professor of Architecture at the California College of the Arts. After twenty years of architecture, he has left active practice and is concentrating on watercolors inspired by vernacular structures, public spaces, and the social organizations that shape the built environment.

Bahram Hooshyar Yousefi, architect, has worked in the architectural division of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization in Eastern Azerbaijan, as well as in architectural offices in Tabriz and Tehran. He teaches at the Tehran Sooreh and Qazvin Azad Universities, and has received awards for his writings on traditional and contemporary architecture. He is the writer of "Art & Architecture" (the first blog of architecture in Persian), and is the founder and editor of the first architecture and urban news agency in Persian.

Caring for Places: The Expanding Public Realm

“Visit www.Places-journal.org.”

“Oh yes, I’ve been there.”

The ease with which we now use the phrase “visit” a website and then consider that we’ve “been there” is for some of us astonishing. Yet it is now commonplace.

It’s a testament, really, to how much we expect of place. That a location in cyberspace fixed in the mind (or on a keyboard) can also be a powerful mental device that creates the occasion for accessing layers of information, for connecting and intertwining ideas, images, and communications in spectacular arrays is “more surprising for you, than for me,” a young woman archly reminded me the other day. That locations in physical space can pose comparable potential might be less obvious to her. Yet the exchange took place over coffee and newspapers at the big common table housed in a local bakery of note, filled with smells of cinnamon, visions of circling fruit among passersby, echoes of past conversations and French customs. She was certainly not visiting it by accident.

Places in the open air or with easy access have long served to gather the public and bring them to share experience, whether through the symbols and voices of political rhetoric or through the many guises of market allure. At the heart of each transaction of significance, however, lies a private moment, an alignment of interests and understandings that shapes our actions.

The genius of electronic communication is that the array of connections can be vast, with little physical effort; the genius of place is that it can involve our bodies as well as our minds, and the full, informing presence of others, not just their abstractions; the full force of the wind and the sun and the tinkles and smells of lives lived multiply—of histories forming the moment and nature having its way with us. Places have breath. They live among us and they present what has been called the inconsolable passage of time; the course of human energies.

We now may enter the public in other ways, through media that traverse the thoughts (and manipulations) of a myriad of minds. The great challenge is to open and expand this great metropolis of the mind in ways that bring us back to, rather than lay waste to in disregard, the palpable realm of the corporeal—that gathering within the natural and constructed ecologies of place, those investments of practices, aspirations and resources that form the matrices for personal and collective action and structure our daily encounters.

Places is now launching a new and expanded website (www.places-journal.org) with links to the California Digital Library, which will make all that we have published in more than two decades available to all. We hope you will soon say you’ve “been there,” and that it will draw you into an expanded network of considerations; ideas with which you will turn to the places around you, engage them with more layers of insight and urgently seek improvement in the ways that we care for the world that is immediate, and which badly needs care.

—Donlyn Lyndon

Contributors

Andrew Bush lives and works in Los Angeles, California. His new work will be shown at the Julie Saul Gallery in New York in January, 2007. His photographs of the Sculpture Park in Graz, Austria, were published in *Garten Der Kunst*, published by Hatje Cantz Verlag.

Phoebe Crisman is a practicing architect, urbanist, and Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Virginia School of Architecture, where she teaches design studios and lectures on architectural theory and urbanism. Her forthcoming edited volume, *Site Out of Mind*, examines diverse strategies founded on an ethical mode of attentiveness to unacknowledged sights.

Dennis Frenchman is Professor of the Practice of Urban Design and Director of the City Design and Development Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His last contribution to *Places* was "Event-Places in North America: City Meaning and Making," Volume 16, Number 3 (Fall 2004), pp. 36-49.

Stefan Hastrup is an architect at Griffin Turnbull Haesloop in San Francisco, California.

The late **Nicholas Howe** taught in the English Department at the University of California, Berkeley. His contributions to *Places* included "Gateways Work Both Ways," Volume 17, Number 3 (Fall 2005), pp. 69-70. A new book of his, *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England*, is being prepared for publication by Yale University Press in 2007.

Allan B. Jacobs is a Consulting Editor for *Places*, and a Professor Emeritus in the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley. He was San Francisco's Director of City Planning from 1967 to 1975, taught city planning and urban design at Berkeley from 1975 to 2001, has consulted with many cities in the U.S. and abroad, and has written four books, including *Making City Planning Work*, *Great Streets*, and, with Elizabeth Macdonald and Yodan Rofe, *The Boulevard Book*. His many awards include a Distinguished Leadership Award from the American Planning Association in 1985.

John Lund Kriken, FAIA, AICP, is a Consulting Partner at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, San Francisco, and an Adjunct Professor, at the University of California, Berkeley, College of Environmental Design. Together with Phil Enquist (SOM, Chicago), he is author of *City Building for the 21st Century*, to be published next year.

Malcolm McCullough is an Associate Professor at the University of Michigan and is the author of *Digital Ground: Architecture, Pervasive Computing and Environmental Knowing*. He has lectured in a dozen countries on new media urbanism.

David Moffat is Managing Editor of *Places* and an architect in Berkeley, California.

Amy Murphy is an Associate Professor in the School of Architecture at the University of Southern California. With degrees in fine arts, architecture and cinema-television production, she has focused much of her academic research on the relationship between media culture and urban experience. She also has an architectural design practice in Los Angeles.

Cervin Robinson is Photo Editor of *Places*.

Francisca M. Rojas is a Ph.D. student in the City Design and Development program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Richard Scherr is the former Chairman of the Graduate Programs in Architecture and Urban Design (1989-99) at Pratt Institute, Professor of Architecture, and Director of the Office for Facilities Planning and Design. He is currently completing the manuscript for a book entitled *The Synthetic City: Excursions into the Real/Not Real*.

Roy Strickland is Director of the Urban Design Program at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He is former Chair of the S.M.Arch.S. Committee at M.I.T. and Director of the Urban Design Program at Columbia. He practices urban design in New York City.

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Call for Submissions

Tenth Annual EDRA/*Places* Awards

Places and the Environmental Design Research Association announce the tenth annual EDRA/*Places* Awards for Place Design, Planning, and Research. We seek nominations for exemplary work from practitioners and researchers in any environmental design or related discipline.

Awards will be presented at the EDRA annual meeting, May 30-June 3 in Sacramento, CA. Winning projects and commentary will be published in the 2007 Awards issue of *Places* and on the new *Places* website: www.places-journal.org. *The postmark deadline for submissions is January 30, 2007.*

The EDRA/*Places* Awards are unique among the programs that recognize professional and scholarly excellence in environmental design. The program is distinguished by its interdisciplinary focus, its concern for human factors in the design of the built environment, and its commitment to promoting links between design research and practice.

The awards program invites entries representing the full breadth of environmental design and related social science activity, including architecture, landscape architecture, planning, urban design, interior design, public art, lighting design, graphic design, environmental psychology, sociology, anthropology and geography.

The 2007 Jury is composed of **Roberta Feldman** (Professor of Architecture, University of Illinois, Chicago), **Ann Forsyth** (Director, Metropolitan Design Center, University of Minnesota), **Michael Pyatok** (Pyatok Associates and Arizona State University), **Anne Whiston Spirn** (Professor of Landscape Architecture, MIT), and **Buzz Yudell** (Principal, Moore Ruble Yudell).

Please download the official entry forms and contest guidelines from the EDRA website: www.edra.org. A wall-size poster is also available to download. For all other inquiries, please contact:

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On the cover: New York's Times Square epitomizes a synthetic urbanism of media spectacle, where distinctions between image and reality have lost their former relevance. Photo by Richard Scherr.

Inside front cover: Work by the Labyrinth Project at the University of Southern California illustrates the interactive qualities of new media and their potential to create a new public realm. Photo courtesy of Kristy King and USC.

Letter One, 10.11.05

Nicholas Howe



Dear Donlyn,

I was at Notre Dame last week to give a lecture about early medieval England: surviving buildings and landscapes, patterns of use and reuse, Iron Age earthworks and Roman *spolia*, later additions to Anglo-Saxon churches, and the like. In the midst of it, to escape the overly planned campus of the university, I spent some time wandering around downtown South Bend. It's the classic dying downtown of a once prosperous American industrial town. It has its monuments to that past prosperity: a 1920s Art Deco fortress of a bank building that still has elevator operators; a twelve-story office

tower, thin and elegant as a knife blade, from the same era, with an architect's office on its top floor, like an aerie. Buildings built with a sense of their place in the world, but now forlorn in their under-use. On the south edge of town, stretching like a protective city wall, is the abandoned Studebaker works—a five- or six-story brick factory that makes the horizontal as powerful and dynamic as the vertical thrust of a great skyscraper.

From a distance, amid this scene of faded emptiness, I saw an orange-red brick building. It had a car dealer's lot on one side, and on the other a minor league ballpark with the Studebaker works looming

over it. The building caught my eye, though, because it looked like nothing so much as one of the small brick churches from the nineteenth century that one sees dotted around rural Ohio and Indiana. This one had a SOLD sign on it, and that was obviously its reprieve from the wrecker's bulldozer.

As I got closer, I saw that it was not a church but a synagogue. It had a Star of David on each of its two gables and a Hebrew inscription on its facade. Its cornerstone read 1901. It hadn't been used as *shul* since the early 1990s, said the man I found inside it, the father of the man who had bought it to restore it for his own house. He was a remodeling contrac-

tor and planned to keep many of the interior elements, such as the great chandelier, the women's balcony, and, most prominently, the white-and-gold ark for the Torah scrolls. A sacrilege, perhaps, but better than tearing down the synagogue, as the adjoining neighborhood of workers' housing had been leveled for the ball-park.

It's the saving unlikelihood of this moment that enchants me and keeps me looking as I wander around. A few days spent in a grand Catholic university leads me to this humble, working-class Orthodox synagogue. A city that once built the most stylishly modernistic of American cars (and you see that same style in those downtown buildings) leads me to a house of worship that in the corn-fields of northwest Ohio would have been a Protestant chapel—such as the one that remains, boarded up but still beautifully chaste, in a tiny town called Neptune.

This, for me, is the life of places: their moments of unlikelihood that register far deeper in the human memory and imagination than any planned site can do, especially any site that offers a po-mo gesture to the past with a knowing wink-and-nod of stylistic allusion. These moments are saving in some literal sense because they preserve the structure and fabric of those who have been there before us; but saving also in the sense of redeeming our own places. This kind of saving isn't about historical preservation (that's a different issue); it's about the ways we live in and move through spaces/places that don't add up neatly, that keep surprising us with glimpses of the sometimes beautiful, the often haunting, and the stubbornly present.

— Nick



Nicholas Howe, whose wonderful book Across an Inland Sea: Writing in Place from Buffalo to Berlin (2003) sets a fine standard for writing about place, passed away September 27. Nick and I had conceived a book consisting of letters we would send to each other about places that we visited. Quick on his feet, he sent me the following letter as the first in the series. In it, he gathers thoughts into the folding embrace of close observation, even as he

leads our minds to reach far. We publish it here to remember him, to ask more of ourselves, and to inspire others.

— Donlyn Lyndon

Above and Opposite: Old synagogue in South Bend, Indiana. Photos by author.

From Tiles to Pixels: Media and the City

Roy Strickland



In response to media's explosive changes and increasing influence across the world, this issue of *Places* explores the relationships between media and the form, social life, and perception of the urban environment.

In recent years, new forms of media have joined television, radio, and film to multiply people's options for communication, learning, entertainment, information gathering, creative expression, and work. Predictions were that new media, particularly the Internet, would hasten the decline of cities by freeing people of the need for face-to-face contact. But many cities are now thriving as media centers; indeed, the temporal and spatial flexibility inherent in new media have actually helped increase and

diversify the use of urban space—especially public space, where wireless and digital technologies now support a fluid mix of work, commuting, socializing, and entertainment. Moreover, as media saturates the environment, its influence on both the making and perception of urban places has grown more powerful than ever, from developing and marketing architectural and planning concepts to literally transforming spaces by being included in them. From PC screen to Jumbotron to ubiquitous advertising campaigns, a never-ending stream of words, images and sounds challenges notions of place, as it alternately distracts attention from the physical environment and intensifies the experience of place.



The following pages address a broad spectrum of issues concerning media and the city. Among other topics, the articles touch on media's influence on the design, perception, delivery and transformation of urban places; media and its representation of the urban environment; media's shaping of public expectations of urban space and the norms of interaction there; and media as a vehicle for teaching place design. The articles point out new media's promise, including making places responsive to their users even as they defy geographical boundaries (Frenchman and Rojas), reinforcing urbanity where density and connectivity combine (McCullough), and stimulating a "renewed desire to reclaim architecture's opportunities as the actual media interface itself" (Murphy). They also point out media's risks (and not just of new media, but of old ones like photography): with saturation, its disassociation of people from the reality of place (Scherr); in the "predominance of image over bodily experience" its potential for manipulating the political and place-making process (Crisman); and with "ubiquitous" computing, its potential for "ten thousand pesky 'little brothers'" to supplant the Orwellian Big Brother (McCullough). In other words, in the challenging, politically charged, ambiguous, ironic and liberating place

that is the city, media can serve as either the stimulant or suppressant of the special, heightened awareness of self, society and opportunity that is integral to urban life.

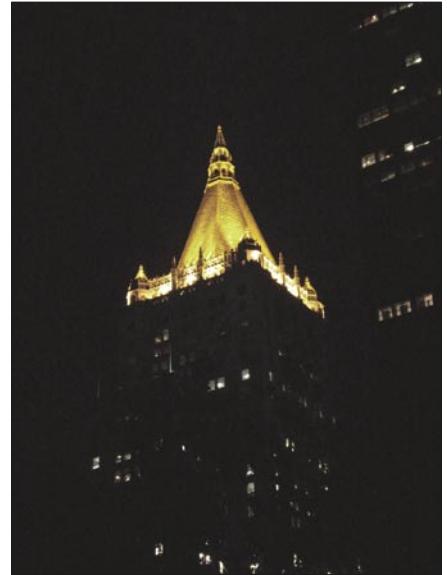
Walking among the ruins of Ostia, the ancient port city of Rome, it is impossible to overlook the mosaics lining the city's walls and floors. These were the advertisements, posters and billboards of their day, identifying services, merchants and celebrities (including Alexander and Helix, famed boxers whose fists are still raised at an oyster bar), as a multicultural population of citizens and slaves connected themselves to the world through a web of trade routes. As we do through media today, the people of Ostia occupied several spaces and realities at once, framed by streets, mosaics, the port's walls, and the sea. There is a line extending from the Decumanus to Broadway. As we stand below Times Square's kinetic screens or surf the net, we cannot help but feel we have traveled here before.

Above: A proposal for pedestrian-activated "urban pixels" is part of MIT's Digital Mile collaboration with the City of Zaragoza. Image by Susanne Seitingner.

Opposite: 42nd Street, N.Y. Photo by Richard Scherr.

The Synthetic City: Excursions into the Real-Not Real

Richard Scherr



As you walk out of the subway at Madison Square, New York City, they stand before you, familiar, yet strange. The Empire State Building, Metropolitan Life, New York Life, and just outside of the view, the Chrysler Building, all ablaze with light in the night sky. The buildings are landmarks, known to all of us, and need little emphasis to dominate our attention. But here they are, highlighted, marked, designated, separated from their normal context, the way quotation marks set off a word or phrase. Buildings—in quotation marks! The intense light has shifted their material reality into something more ephemeral. They are still the same buildings we know—but made up to be more noticed, to look more like landmarks than their normal images would suggest—the Empire State Building made to “look” like the Empire State Building. And we do notice them, enjoy them, marvel over them—and we are conscious that they exist, that they are different (“How radiant! How beautiful!”), as if the buildings were now seen for the very first time, and glow with a sense of life that we never before knew existed. The buildings are still of this world, but they are also set apart from this world. They are real—but at the same time, somehow not real—at least in the way that we have always known them.

One of the fundamental shifts in the twentieth century has been the challenge to authenticity—the replacement of the real, based in direct observation, i.e., the actual thing—with products and events that are shifted into the realm of representation, fantasy and the artificial. We are able to observe through lenses that magnify the invisible, expose the hidden, deepen the color, freeze the moving, crop the continuous, and conceal the extraneous. The possibilities of mechanical reproduction take the unique and make it ubiquitous, removing all vestiges of the object’s originality, materiality and aura.¹ Art, literature, theater, film and other arts analyze and transform experience and objects through a wide variety of devices based in pictorial illusion, abstraction, fragmentation, superimposition, montage, deconstruction and other techniques which remove us further from the temporal and spatial settings of real experience. The entertainment and advertising industries exert a powerful influence on culture, which have given us new worlds, dreams and fantasies that offer compelling alternatives to the existing traditions, codes and places of our daily lives.

Nowhere has the artificial, or the synthetic, had a more powerful influence than in the development and quality of the American city. Over the last several decades, the proliferation of popular culture, mass media, and the power of global corporations to blanket the world with the same images, same products, same stores has become the great equalizing force that covers the urban landscape everywhere, although in several different guises. On the one

Left to Right: Empire State Building, Metropolitan Life Building, New York Life Building at night.

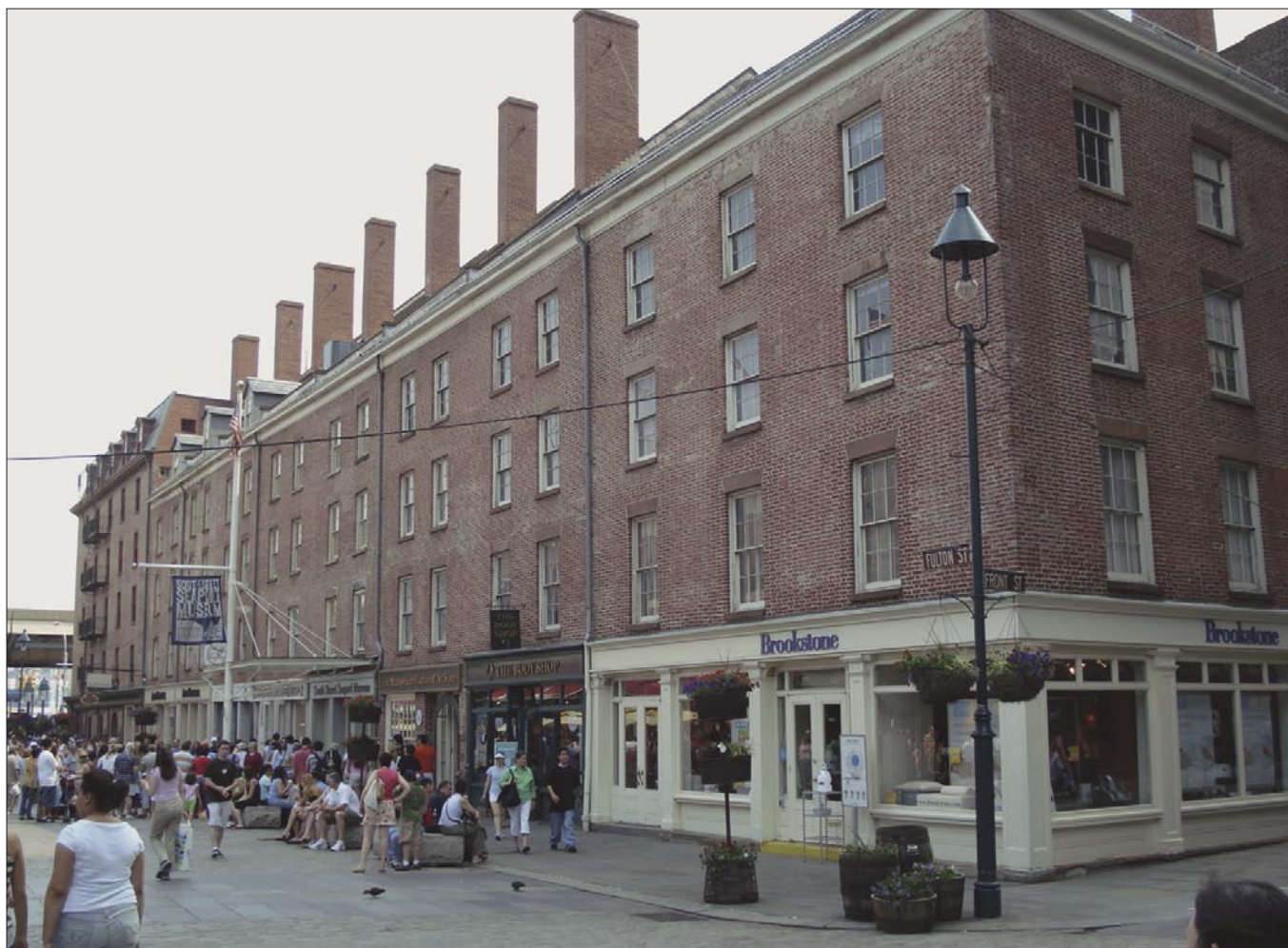


hand, it exists in isolation in its most pure manifestation: the Disneylands, Universal Studios, and other entertainment theme parks—even shopping malls—have programmed mass entertainment experiences to be enjoyed by everyone. More insidiously, the theme park has emerged within the central city in the form of mixed commercial/restaurant entertainment districts. Sometimes these are unabashedly exposed in completely new settings (the recent transformation of 42nd Street, New York); more typically they are encased in historic “warehouse” districts (Larimer Square, Denver; Pioneer Square, Seattle; Sundance Square, Fort Worth; Quincy Market, Boston; the Gaslight District in San Diego; the Warehouse Districts in Dallas, Cleveland, and Portland, and many more); and the same instinct has brought the “mall” of cities everywhere (including New York, the one city thought to be

impervious to suburbanization—as seen by the transformation of Soho, 57th Street, Fifth Avenue, Chelsea Piers, and the Seaport).² More recently, the packaging of cultural-entertainment districts, using museums, sports complexes, and convention centers (again, so much the better if connected with “history”), has emerged as the new formula for pumping life into old central districts, as observed in the redevelopment of Pittsburg, Denver, Baltimore, Hartford, Cleveland, St. Paul, Philadelphia, Seattle, and many other cities.

In many of the above cases, such as Denver’s Larimer Square and the New York Seaport, there was an attempt to incorporate the authentic, original structures of the city as

Above: 42nd Street, N.Y.



part of the package through the creation of “historic districts,” or some similar provision designed to legislate preservation. In the most restrictive cases, virtually no change to the historic fabric is allowed, any proposed alterations are closely monitored, and buildings are restored to replicate their original state as accurately as possible. Despite good intentions, however, the result typically falls short of “true” authenticity. As soon as even the most sensitive design intervention (or even simple intent prior to actual reconstruction) takes place, a part of the city has been artificially “cropped” from its surroundings, and time has been made to stop, bypassing all references to ongoing cultural and physical changes to the rest of the city.

This framing of the normally continuous and chang-

ing into a frozen moment of time turns the authentic into a parody, oddly mute and introverted, finally ending up as a museum, a representation of itself rather than a place allowed to be deformed and contaminated by the dynamics of cultural, social and economic change. But removing the legislative frame is not the answer either. When historic settings are not so insulated within static and controlled districts and are more freely open to the demands of the marketplace, they become “recycled and revalued territories...turned into gentrified, historicized, commodified, and privatized landscapes,” or once again, the entertainment theme park.³ In either case, protected or nonprotected, the historic fabric of the city becomes separated into a displaced, artificial condition, a form of tableau configured and framed without a context—or within a context that no longer matters.

Above: South Street Seaport, Schermerhorn Row, N.Y.

The commodification of the city based in mass media, simulacra, and the inauthentic that has been generated out of a perhaps less-than-fortuitous mix of the proliferation of popular culture, new communication technologies, and global capitalist expansion has been well documented.⁴ However, indignation and incredulity quickly recede into history as the phenomenon of the unique and new more and more becomes the ubiquitous and commonplace. Clearly, none of it could have come about unless both city officials and developers became knowing collaborators in the enterprise. Historically, the collapse of center cities throughout the U.S. in the 1970s and 80s presented a dying patient in need of resuscitation by any means. And the power of the media to reshape culture over the same period generated a public that accepted—no—*demand*ed change. These leaders could hardly have responded otherwise. Yet, while the revitalization of city cores with interchangeable theme stores, entertainment districts, sports stadiums, and the rest may have done wonders for the tax base, and cleaned up areas of blight and decay, it has also come at a heavy price in terms of each city's unique sense of place and range of experience—or, as expressed by the architect Louis Kahn, the city as an form of incubator, “where a young boy, as he walks through it, may see something that will tell him what he wants to do his whole life.”⁵

The point of all this is that there has always existed an edge (sometimes blurred, but still an edge) between the world of the real/authentic and the fictive/artificial; life, or the real world, on the one side, and fantasy, entertainment and art on the other. Even in the case of the long history of theatrical forms and entertainment, the experience, while fused within the ongoing activities of the city, was always bounded, contained by a defining wall, or an interruption in the flow of events, a critical polar division that articulated the world of fantasy/illusion from that of reality.⁶ This notion of understanding experience or culture in terms of polar oppositions has been a recurring method of inquiry throughout the twentieth century (i.e., high vs. low culture, reality vs. fantasy, signifier vs. signified, public vs. private, figure vs. ground, the static vs. the changing, etc.), and has been fundamental to our comprehension of the world around us.

It is becoming clear, however, that oppositional strategies are limited to explain more ambiguous and interactive investigations in art, science, linguistics and literature; thus the emergence of deconstruction, chaos, chance and other theories that deal with the fuzzy zones of hybrid, or in-between phenomena. The computer, with the technology of documentation through digitalization, has enabled



all visual phenomena to be “leveled out” into a common, interactive field, allowing all forms and media to interact and be combined. As the shaping of popular culture and the arts continues to evolve, the edges between the real and fictive are starting to disappear, and we begin to see urban interventions, such as giant diode displays and animated building lighting that exploit the use of media, incorporate methods of scenographic sequencing, superimposition, fragmentation, replication, and other techniques that blur the edges of temporal, programmatic and spatial boundaries.

This blurring of the polar city marks the beginning of a newly merged, hybrid phenomenon, which I call the

Above: NASDAQ sign, Conde Nast Building, N.Y.



“real-not real.”⁷ It begins with a realization that we can no longer clearly differentiate the real/authentic and the fictive/artificial: as the city has evolved and recycled, neither condition can be found anymore in its pure pedigree form. Facets of the city that started with, or have some remaining vestiges of the authentic have unavoidably been contaminated by spatial/physical and programmatic changes, or have been recontextualized through new symbolic, or cultural associations. Thus, we find that an authentic historic building may be converted into a McDonald’s, and we’re not sure anymore if the building is “original,” or a fabrication that recontextualizes its

contents; and if it really is the original, as in the case of the Candler Building of 1914 on 42nd Street, does the tenant, with its over-the-top lighting, ten plasma display menu boards, LCD projections of New York imagery, and ATMs, overwhelm its host, and seem to make it no better or worse than the newer fabrications down the street? Context becomes ubiquitous—authentic or fabrication is no longer in doubt, as the question no longer begs to be asked.

Of course, such imposed fantasies, media creations, invented narratives, and artificial tableaux still must accommodate circumstantial necessities of performance (be entered, heated, stand up, be circulated through). But they have otherwise become so ingrained that they are now totally absorbed in our understanding of the world;

Above: McDonald’s in the Candler Building, 42nd Street, N.Y.

thus it is that they have acquired an identity of being “real” (according to their own terms). So, while McDonald’s was once a disturbance in the midst of the “real” city around it, it no longer exerts such an effect today (even in its current location in the Piazza della Rotunda in Rome!). It is a part of the scene as much as anything else; and the same goes for Mickey Mouse, the IBM logo, the Old West, or any number of other invented narratives or symbols that easily slip into a mythic status. As the differences between the authentic and inauthentic become smaller and smaller, and harder to decipher, they also begin to matter less and less, to the point of indifference. What were once polar opposites finally collapse, or blur into the singularity of the real-not real, bits of cultural debris that can be used in any number of ways, and whose meaning shifts through changing association and contexts.

Through the increasing power of communication technologies, tendencies toward dissimulation throughout current cultural production, and the dominance of private control we are rapidly evolving a new kind of “synthetic” city which is taking the place of the traditional city we once knew. The notion of the synthetic here is less a description of the inauthentic or simulacra, as referred to above, than a realization that the city is a manufactured product that is controlled and artificially manipulated to an extent far beyond what was previously possible, resulting in an interactive, mixed field of information and space. Such control is exerted through global private corporations of an unprecedented scale and power, which use the city as a communication mechanism for generating capital, and further remove it from its former role as a text of broader cultural transformation. As the later stages of capitalism evolve, greater competition generates expansion and continued growth necessary for the prosperity and survival of private interests. These are now requiring ever-more-dominating techniques of control, fueled by the evolution of media technology—thus resulting in the current state of the synthetic as a dominant force in the city’s evolution.

The New City

The nature of the synthetic city is the result of a continuing evolution of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century city, with its diverging patterns of social and physical instability, the development of mass advertising through major national publications, radio (later television), and giant billboards; the inventions of electricity, sound amplification, and the telephone; the evolution of Hollywood and the film industry; pop/commercial architecture; and generally, the increasing role of all forms of mechanical

reproduction. It is, however, useful to discern a number of characteristics of the current urban condition that present some significant differences from earlier city forms.

If the traditional city tended to be based on a clear delineation of polar conditions (i.e., public vs. private, manmade vs. natural, historical vs. the new, and real vs. the fictive), the synthetic city is composed of somewhat fuzzier situations, where the characteristics of urban events and places become mixed, redefined and blurred into new hybrid combinations (or contradictions)—i.e., public-private, live-work, the reconstituted past, the constructed landscape, and the real-not real.

Our greatest cities have grown and been transformed according to a trajectory based in collective needs and aspirations—i.e., the formation of community, trade, exchange of information, the advancement of learning and the arts, etc.—all of which unfolds through a larger *public*, or cultural dimension. But the synthetic city doesn’t so much evolve, as it is controlled, orchestrated and manipulated mainly through *private* entities (sometimes of global dimension) whose motives tend to be focused, circumstantial, and based on self-interest and expansion within a prevailing capitalist environment.

The open, nonhierarchical grid, minimizing locational preference and site specificity recurs throughout the history of the city, allowing new development (typically single buildings) to be arbitrarily and incrementally built on available property; thus it manifested the ultimate independence between architecture and the city.⁸ The synthetic city also gives little importance to location (anything can be built anywhere), but here preference is given to larger groupings of interrelated development that are often independent of the grid or other neutral infrastructures. The goal is to achieve “critical mass,” as well as define a self-contained, comprehensive internal order and experience that can exist independently of its surroundings.

The formal structure of cities has always been based on institutions that are relatively permanent and stable, as well as gradual transitions and sequences between events that allowed the evolution of organic interrelationships between the parts. The synthetic city, on the other hand, is made up of programs which may quickly change (for nothing lasts very long), causing abrupt shifts and disjunction between parts that might as well be completely disassociated, or that sometimes rub up against each other in odd, unpleasant or enlightening ways. Rather than a preexisting typology of conventions, or preferred forms associated with articulated functions that have been tested over time, the synthetic city requires new combinations of



functions unrelated to existing typologies, in which building form in itself is less important than the accommodation of specified (and often complex and varied) programmatic demands that require unique formal solutions.

The essence of the synthetic city is the ability to control: any particular development, building or event can be made to happen anywhere and take on any form given the

Left Above: The Warner Bros. flagship store (low-end retail culture) occupies a monument that is built to endure on Fifth Avenue and 57th Street, N.Y.

Left Below: After several years, a “quick change” takes place into the Louis Vuitton Store (high-end retail culture), and one hardly blinks.

Right: The former RCA Building transformed into timeless spectacle, Rockefeller Center, N.Y.

power and desire of private interests to make it happen. Of course, the commodification of production within the city, supported by the underlying agenda of expanding profit is not a new phenomenon.⁹ What has changed is the degree of its influence. Fueled by media’s ability to shape mass desire for the same products, the same entertainment, the same images, packaged in the same forms, it is today nearly impossible to discern any other reality outside this world of spectacle and popular culture. We now find that the power of the media and corporate interests to fabricate an alternate world, or reframe and recycle original contexts, has blanketed virtually every facet of reality, so that in fact there *is* no other reality that can be separated out from the fabrication.¹⁰

The real and the fictive have collapsed into the real-

unreal. Fragments of history, memories and artifacts based on places, and buildings remembered in their original state remain; but they have become transformed through new intents and agendas, they exist within different contexts, and they ambiguously intersect within an overlay of less authentic sources and forms, so that the differences between the two, if perceivable, make little difference. For a variety of reasons the real (authentic history, the original source) can no longer be placed in a privileged position from the artificial (simulated history, the copy): the replication can be made superior to the original; the original has been repaired or refurbished to an extent that it looks like a replication; or the passage of time has removed us so far from the source that the precise form or narrative of the original recedes into the distance. Thus, even the possible manifestation of the original automatically becomes suspect, and is assumed to be distorted from its original state.

All of this begs the question whether the copy, reinvention or simulation is any more of a distortion than our transformed perception of the original. In short, both the authentic and the replication have become blurred to an extent that they are interchangeable, and there is no longer any obligation (or ability) to differentiate between them.¹¹ The synthetic has become real—and the real has become synthetic.

All sources, forms, programs, agendas and styles become legitimate in this new urban scene, to be used, mixed and matched depending on the predetermined needs, desires and expectations of those in control—which, presumably, are the same as those who consume the product. The synthetic city becomes a form of machine *to produce effects*, able to be manipulated, controlled and changed at will to perform as required, whenever and wherever necessary. These effects, produced through new media, advertising, and the market-generated, constant replacement of physical settings have generated an ephemeral city of continuous change and transformation.

Glimpses of Opportunities

Given the nature of the synthetic's condition of flux and impermanence, a critical question arises as to whether any semblance of the traditional qualities of place and permanence in a city can be maintained in a context of shifting values and cultural associations. As discussed earlier, even the tools of historic preservation, when used to maintain the integrity of the original urban fabric, have little power to insulate a city from perceptual and cultural shifts that fundamentally alter the qualities and meaning of the artifact itself.



There are times, however, when media and events, when executed well, put places in the city into sharper focus, and a sense of place emerges as a shifting, dynamic perception, a new form of presence that achieves success on its own terms.

Consider, for instance, the New 42nd Street Studios building, with its changing patterns of colored light, echoing the dynamic shifts of bodies in the space within. The transforming facade captures the dynamic spirit of

Above: A “new” historic building (stone hung on hidden steel structure) constructed in Soho, a strictly legislated historic district containing the world’s foremost collection of cast-iron buildings.

Below: Times Square, N.Y.



movement itself, establishing a sense of place that stands apart yet relates to the vibrating mass media scene around it. Here, the architecture sharply resonates with something very real and majestic—the moving bodies, the changing light, suspended in space within a structural membrane—as specific an identity of place as the old succession of flashing marquees from the 1940s. We realize it, and it stops us in our tracks.

Or take the recently opened Apple store in front of the General Motors Building. A transcendent, cubic glass entry pavilion, it meets the challenge of establishing an iconic representation for one of the most influential cor-

porations in America today. A display of pure reflection by day, and a blaze of light by night, it also anchors the heretofore anonymous plaza at the base of the building with power and distinction.

Such buildings and events, reveling in spectacle, media and dynamism, could become our new monuments, and help define a sense of place in a synthetic city no longer composed of stable, unchanging forms. While shifting, transitory, superficial and market-driven, their overall presence, however, establishes expectations for more of everything—brighter, larger, and ever more memorable and fantastic. Thus, one building, sign or event in Times Square or Soho may change, or disappear, but we can be assured that the overall effect will stay the same. We can hope that design awareness may lead to new environments that offer multiplicity and choice. But the danger is that it may only “appear” that way, leading to a bewildering recurrence of sensory-numbing imagery that overwhelms substance and diversity.

Yet another result could be the city of simulated difference, a synthetic environment of wildly diverse preferences and options, carefully orchestrated to facilitate the most enhanced effects. Vestiges of the real will continue to exist as precious, preserved artifacts, analogous to original historic texts placed under glass. But they become ever smaller, more minute, and almost inconsequential in the face of new media experiences that enlarge, intensify and realign our experience in a newly expanded sense of place, however impermanent and transitory.

In the end, however, we might as easily discover that the condition of the synthetic is far more closely aligned with a changing, mixed, newly emerging multicultural urban population. No longer sustained by the limited, reductive text of the historic city, it may require far more complex, rich and multivalent messages and settings to evolve and flourish.

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).
2. The notion of the mall of America is thoroughly discussed in Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992). See, in particular, Christine Boyer’s chapter, “Cities for Sale: Merchandising History at South Street Seaport.” Also see Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1994), pp. 421–458.
3. Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, pp. 448–49.
4. Other histories besides those cited above would include the development of some

Above: The New 42nd Street Studio Building, N.Y. Platt, Byard, Dovell Architects.



of the more important business and technological innovators, such as Walt Disney and Microsoft.

5. John Lobell, *Between Silence and Light* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1979), p. 44.

6. Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory*, pp. 74–75.

7. One might give some recognition here to the seminal work of Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966)—in particular, his discussion of the notion of ambiguity and the phenomenon of “both-and.”

8. Manfredo Tafuri, “Towards a Critique of Architectural Ideology,” in K. Michael Hays, ed., *Architectural Theory Since 1968* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 13.

9. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1995), provided the seminal articulation of this position more than thirty years ago.

10. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (Semiotext, Inc., 1983), pp. 23–25.

11. This discussion is inspired by Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”—in particular, his views on the collapse of reality

and illusion in film through consciousness of the filming apparatus and a continual shifting of images, which denies reflection—as opposed to the phenomenon of distancing essential to theatrical experience.

All photographs are by the author.

Above: The Apple Store on General Motors Plaza, N.Y. Bohlin, Cywinsky, Jackson Architects.

On the Urbanism of Locative Media

Malcolm McCullough

Must “media” mean remoteness? The urbanism of electronic communications has seldom been encouraging. Whether the word “media” implies passive entertainment, global networking, production software, or the attention economy of all of these, it does tend to imply disembodiment; and that implies trouble for space and place as we know them.

But what happens when media become embodied in access, spatial in operations, and place based in content? In particular, what happens when information technology moves out beyond the desktop into the sites and situations of everyday urban life? What does it mean to apply “locative” media?

From Virtual to Embodied

Instead of one great disembodied world to be entered through the looking glass of a desktop computer screen (as described fifteen years ago by John Walker¹), the newer-media paradigm of ubiquitous computing brings things back to the messy multiplicity of street level.

This shift has been years in the making. Most of a decade has passed since the ACM, that largest and most venerable of information technology research organizations, named its year 2000 plenary conference “After Cyberspace.”² In 2005, by many accounts the hot event in Web design was Where 2.0, which proclaimed that most online information has some geo-spatial component. At this writing, “the interactive city” is a prominent track in the International Society of Electronic Arts (ISEA) biennial—being held in Silicon Valley, the one-time source of so many forecasts on the irrelevance of place. Even if the Internet does connect much of the world instantaneously, the word “cyberspace” now sounds dated. Although one can still hear residual invitations to “visit” websites, all that information is now coming to you—with you, wherever you are; and is increasingly *about* where you are. In the process, one belief that has changed is that the way to find and use networked information must be solitary, sedentary or virtual.

Popular adjectives for the shift include tangible, mobile, ubiquitous, pervasive, invisible, embedded, physical, environmental and ambient. Among these, the current trend in favor of “locative media” emphasizes the use of positional coordinates. Here the cultural focus turns toward activities that, despite being information intensive, have failed to dematerialize.³ It is of interest how many of these are urban.

For evidence that geography is anything but obsolete, recall that real estate prices have soared highest where the most density and connectivity are found. Small-business enterprise famously favors the neighborhoods with the

best amenities. Universities have become some of the most ambitious builders, as higher education remains difficult to download. Tourism, which relies heavily on the perception of place, continues to advance as one of the world’s leading economic activities. Shopping still provides the glue in much urban design, as new, glittering retail districts seem only to complement the rise of online shopping (much of the latter happens outside the home anyway). And cafes continue to appear on more of the best street corners, full of people who have come out in public to access “media” (even if solo via laptop computer).

One obvious case of embodiment in media usage concerns social navigation among young people. Of this the most distinct cultural patterns may be in Tokyo. As the ethnographer Mizumi Ito has written, *keitai* text messaging has created a new civility on trains; tightened social groups that have combine online and face-to-face activities; made an advantage of very dense pedestrian settings (whereas in America navigation systems are thought of in terms of vehicles); and created the opportunity for plans to emerge as members of groups play their city.⁴

From Macro to Micro

Up to now, studies in media urbanism have most often focused at the macro scale.⁵ This was understandable in an era of information infrastructure-building. Especially from the standpoint of information technologies as agents of organizational change, economic geography may well dominate media urbanism.

The cyberspace metaphor has held well at this large scale. The lament is by now familiar. The throughput of global capital markets now dwarfs the sum of nations’ gross domestic product. Out there in the space of flows, places have become mere operands in the fiscal abstractions of global capital. Big, disinterested money obliterates local value at almost every turn. Development formulas that succeed in one locale are imposed insensitively on others. Broadcast news reconfigures space and time with its editing.⁶ Entertainment empires push “content” as though it were arbitrary filler. Brands transcend not only their places of origin but the products and services that carry them. And sitting there in the placeless spaces that result, people act out their detachment by plugging into as many electronic media distractions as they can, streaming from all over the planet, preferably all at once.

Even at this macro-scale, however, media have a geography. Known as the “tunnel effect,” this involves the tendency of information economies to require a dense ecology of production support services, and to congregate

these activities in a few select places.⁷ Whether in abstract finance, commodified culture, or the mobility of creative work, the major global cities have become more connected to one another, and less to their hinterlands; and following this evolution, secondary cities have had to find unique niches, or else face decline.

But instead of belaboring such usual concerns, might it be more useful to inquire in some other way? What if under a media world, built on the fast-and-far, the real frontiers are in the close-and-slow?

For example, the Bluetooth communications protocol that exists in many mobile phones creates a sensate radius of several meters, which passively registers any other such device that enters. In the project “BlueStates: Exploring Relational Space,” Mark Pesce and John Tonkin demonstrated that by monitoring this “bluesphere,” one can compile a record of “proximal encounters,” and list, map, or share it online.⁸

Close-and-slow concerns habitual patterns, trusted partners, service ecologies, conviviality, and spontaneity. It has higher resolution than fast-and-far. It has been underappreciated, at least in an American culture that overemphasizes commerce and distrusts cities. But while Americans sit with their laptops, increasing numbers of Europeans, and East Asians—even villagers in places lacking more basic physical amenities—are hitting the town with the only networking device they own in the palm of their hand. There, the experience of “media and the city” is less one of the broadcast push, and more diversely one of pull: messaging, searching, meeting and tagging.

So now, in locative media, which have admittedly been built on macro-infrastructure so far, the tech world turns its focus to the micro-scale instead. The study of universalizing global infrastructures may remain necessary, even central, to media urbanism; but it is no longer sufficient.

From Universal to Situated

If you can do anything, anytime, anyplace, then in a sense you are nowhere. Even a technology application so basic as mobile remote conversation has forced society to reexamine its protocols for site after site. Who among us has not wished for some means to silence all the phones in some room, or even on some street corner?

Locative media move away from the universal and one-size-fits-all attitudes that have so often been implied in “ubiquitous” computing. Good urbanists know well that totalizing schemes are not to be trusted. Given the extent and power of the technology—in which microchips now far outnumber humans, a Web server can fit on a nickel, a

radio-frequency ID tag (RFID) costs scarcely more than a penny, and a chipped ID card can pack personal background data—the context insensitivity of most information technology has become much more of a social liability than before.

Prospects for authoritarian abuse are obviously daunting, especially given America’s recent cultural regressions. But even in this concern there is a move from the macro to the micro. Before raising the usual Orwellian red flag, consider how much more likely than Big Brother are ten thousand pesky “little brothers.” While tyranny remains mostly a prospect, information pollution is an everyday reality. Software interrupts your work to offer upgrades. Music comes out of restroom ceilings. How many times a day must you swipe a card or wave a badge? Portable devices come with instruction manuals bigger than they are. Spam floods your virtual mailbox, and advertising dominates many physical spaces. Somewhere there is a device flashing 12:00 at you. This is the only techno-futurism needed in this essay: technology applied without context *will* behave obnoxiously, and smart devices *will* make people do stupid things.

Much as people continue to use their cars despite the bad side effect of atmospheric pollution (or credit cards despite how they reveal such personal things as what one eats or wears), the world embraces ubiquitous computing despite its unintended consequences. Once just the province of plodding public agencies, spatial information systems have by now achieved some kind of unintended critical mass—not only for mobile communications, but also for Web searches, event site selection, onboard navigation, in-flight entertainment, environmental forecasting, freight logistics, a corn-maze craze, security lockdowns, flash-mob disobediences, tracking the family dog, and multiplayer street-level gaming.

To illustrate some basic components of locative media application, consider Zipcar.⁹ A windshield-mounted device provides a positioning system (GPS) and wireless communication to a Web database used for hour-in-advance reservations, plus a tagging system (RFID) to recognize the membership card of the person who has reserved it. Together, this enables short-term car use without a lengthy transaction at a rental counter, a convenience that ultimately benefits the city by the likes of twenty people per Zipcar who do not need to own a vehicle themselves.

The law of unintended consequences has a corollary that happy outcomes are the product of active appropriation. It is important to try things out. The more practical and affordable the engineering performance of a medium

becomes, the more appropriateness surpasses performance as the main success factor. Appropriateness may be organizational or personal, casual or deeply skilled, and functionally essential or just conceptually aesthetic. Yet it is almost always a matter of context. So, for present purposes, it may be most useful to refer to “situated computing.”¹⁰

From Behavior to Intent

As context has become a central theme in the rising discipline of interaction design, interest has renewed in the social psychology generally known as activity theory. This work has moved beyond analysis of spatial behavior toward more emphasis on intent.¹¹

How experts play situations has become important not only to the usability but also the usefulness of recent information technology. Interaction designers not only study how people deal with machine interfaces individually, but also how people deal with each other, and even reorganize themselves, when mediated in new ways. There are already many examples: the use of a system that makes colleagues aware of each others’ presence; the introduction of reputation systems in an online membership organization; the circumstances of using a virtual overlay display in machine repair; a storytelling itinerary for tourists; a personalization service in city mapping.

In the psychological fundamentals of this discipline, context is not the setting, itself, of an activity, but one’s engagement with it.¹² Environment is not an “other,” or an empty container, but a perception of persistent possibilities for action. As people learn cumulatively from repeated engagements, they come to associate settings with particular states of intent. This includes not only the spaces but also all other aspects of the embodiment: the objects, labels, and props of an activity.¹³ Through these, engagement comes to be about something. For example, this is why meditation teachers insist that a particular spot in a house be set aside for no other purpose.

Traditionally, the main reason for putting up with technological annoyances has been work. The activity studied by the computer-human interface designer was almost always a production task, and the worldview in which the designer had been trained was most often mechanistic. Yet even for workplaces, it has long been clear that knowledge work requires less procedure and more participation. Note that twenty years have passed since Lucy Suchman’s influential *Plans and Situated Actions* brought ethnographic sensibilities to Silicon Valley.¹⁴ What Suchman found in the tacit knowledge and support networks of the workplace was not so different from what Jane Jacobs once found

for urbanism. Such sociological staples as presentation of self, tacit boundaries, and ad hoc networks have long shaped information technology toward its escape from the desktop, into the social milieu.

From Pushing to Posting

Like the valuation of apparent chaos by Jacobs’s urbanism, but more diverse and infinitely more interlinked, locative media urbanism resists the sterilizing effects of the inevitable preference of big organizations for predictability. In the process this mitigates at least some forms of passivity. “What if content is something you do, not something you are given?”¹⁵ Thus, John Thackara’s “Articles of Association between design, technology, and the people formerly known as Users” declared the design challenge of pervasive computing as a need to depart from the “push” mentality of consumerism.

To skip mass spectacle in favor of smaller, and more personalized cultural acts is an example of what Chris Anderson has named the “long tail.”¹⁶ This theory explains the impact of large numbers of items with low numbers of instances. The most common example is the book sales ranking on Amazon. There, the sales from the huge catalogue of low-selling items (the tail of the company’s best-sellers graph) have greater volume than the sales from the big sellers at the head of the list (i.e., all that would be practical to carry without information technology for inventory and distribution). Similarly, the integral sum of bottom-up street life—the everyday urbanism of flea markets, food carts, pick-up games, meet-up points, etc.—outnumbers what has been top-down formulated, branded, and pushed by corporations.

The anthropologist Jyri Engstrom contends that even for merchandise, that staple of corporate urbanism, the long tail implies bottom-up practices, such as RFID-enabled local, folk, “own-logo” alternatives to UPC (barcode) and SKU in tagging goods, especially in developing countries.¹⁷

That would be an instance of “folksonomies,” Thomas Vander Wal’s related coinage for emergent, bottom-up taxonomies in social software.¹⁸ As evident in resources such as Tagzania, online sharing of tagged information about physical things has advanced considerably. In particular, the popularity of the photo-sharing service Flickr has allowed people to share their sequences of urban experience by posting images so frequently that they are experienced as streams. Would-be *flâneurs* are now streaming their derives. Here is rich social experience of the city that does not require any shopping.

One example is a recreation known as geo-caching, which uses GPS to hunt for physical messages and tokens hidden at particular coordinates by players. In the friend-awareness service Dodgeball, members navigate socially by sending their location and receiving identities of others within a ten-block radius. As has been observed with relation to Dodgeball: “As the technology increasingly allows us to satisfy more eclectic needs, any time those needs require a physical presence...the logic of the long tail will favor urban environments over less densely populated ones....”¹⁹

Virtual-communitarian Howard Rheingold had his epiphany about smart mobs of Japanese teenagers in real-space Shibuya, a neighborhood as dense as any.²⁰

Outlook: Rethinking Attitudes about Place

Perceptions of place may be subjective and fleeting, but grounding life in effective contexts remains absolutely necessary. Resorting to nostalgia hardly helps in doing this, however; there is little to be gained from understanding place mainly as something lost.

At least to the more mobile and networked of us, place has become less about our origins on some singular piece of blood soil, and more about forming connections with the many sites in our lives. Place become less an absolute location fraught with tribal bonds or nostalgia, and more a relative state of mind that one gets into by playing one's boundaries and networks.²¹ We belong to several places and communities, partially by degree, and in ways that are mediated.

Nevertheless, we can, and must, temper universal information technology design with more helpful attitudes about place. The contextual design of information technologies must now reach beyond the scale of individual tasks to embrace architecture, urbanism, and cultural geography. No methodology exists for this difficult role, but this has already become a problem that is costly to ignore. Since place and culture are intertwined, it follows that more place-centered interaction design becomes a more culturally valuable endeavor. There is no escaping the fact that the world around us is being layered with digital systems. There is no denying our dismay at surveillance, saturation marketing, autonomous annoyances, and relentless entertainment. Whatever our desire for a “sense of place,” we seem destined to get “places with sense.”

As the embodiment, personalization, and bottom-up economies of mobile and embedded computing kick in, the older top-down cultural models are not enough. There is urbanism in how people obtain, layer, and manage their

connections. Like attention itself, any belonging to community or place is made continuous, partial, and multiple by this mediation.

Where you are matters, enough so that a new industry has been forming to assist you.

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The Seattle Central Library: Civic Architecture in the Age of Media

Amy Murphy



Current technological devices are changing our understanding of time and space. Most importantly, they are changing the way we *expect* to experience time and space. Our lives and cities have continually been redefined by innovation, making it hard to argue which technology (mercantile, automobile, digital, etc.) has had the most impact. Yet, we are at a point of significant inversion, where many technologies are becoming more active than their users. As Simone Weil has suggested, technology now “is the thing that thinks, and it is the man who is reduced to the state of the thing.”¹

While all of technology might be involved in this inversion to some extent, media technology has had the most

powerful impact on the general population and its relationship to urban experience. Media today is more mediatory than ever, insinuating itself between us and everything else. In particular, digitization has created a situation where media is now not only a means by which we *understand* the world (as with traditional media like newspapers), but increasingly the means by which we *experience* it. Even when we visit real urban spaces such as Times Square, the plurality of experience suggested by the two words “public city,” has been slurred into one word—“publicity.” Through this slurring, the larger experiential potentials of architecture, as well as media, more often than not become diminished.²

Yet, in several completed projects in the United States, it is possible to see a renewed desire to reclaim architecture’s potential as the actual media interface itself.

Above: Seattle Central Library, exterior view. Courtesy of Seattle Public Library.

Michael Maltzan's MOMA Queens, Zaha Hadid's Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, Herzog and DeMeuron's de Young Museum in San Francisco, and Rem Koolhaas's Central Library in Seattle each try to provide visually engaging urban experiences in real time and space without demoting architecture to mere backdrop for other more immersive digital media. In much of the rhetoric used to explain these works, their architects also reveal a common intention to confront the dilemmas of producing architecture in an age of digital media by using spatially and temporally exciting visual strategies rather than simply decorating a building's surface.

While the success of each project varies, it is interesting to look at the relationship between the rhetoric and the reality. This is particularly true for the Seattle Central Library, where the well-documented intentions of Rem Koolhaas and his Office of Metropolitan Architecture have received even more praise than the highly acclaimed finished product.

Coexistence of the Digital and the Real

With regard to the Central Library, Koolhaas has often talked of a perceived assault on books by the culture of digital information. "As other media of information emerge and become plausible, the library seems threatened, a fortress ready to be 'taken' by potential enemies," he has written. "In this scheme, the Electronic become identified with the Barbaric."³ As Koolhaas has repeatedly stated, this positioning is not only untenable but unnecessary. "It is not a matter of either/or.... The modern library, especially in a cyber city such as Seattle, must transform itself into an information storehouse aggressively orchestrating the coexistence of all available technologies."⁴ At a fundamental level, this need could, of course, be said to pertain to any building that also has a website.

Yet, in Seattle, Koolhaas has attempted to find a new relationship between the virtual and the actual. This is clearly illustrated by the somewhat unprecedented containment of all books on a long ascending ramp and the centralization of all resources (digital, human and traditional) in a fifth-level "Mixing Chamber"—"where the chattering of 132 computer keypads adds a modern sound to the coughs and whispers of a library."⁵ Koolhaas's intent was to make the Central Library more than a building "exclusively dedicated to the book"; it would be "an information store," where all new and old media would be presented "under a regime of new equalities," in a building "that combines spatial excitement in the real world with diagrammatic clarity in virtual space."⁶



While most architectural reviews have applauded the library for its success at establishing new relationships, both social and technological, there has also been a constant rumble of counter-critique about this orchestration of multiple experiences within one large tent-like enclosure. Though Internet blogs represent a very limited sample of public opinion, those addressing the library have tended to return to a common set of issues: complaints of noise due to the open structure; the continued dilemma of coexisting with the homeless; and the failure of both the planning and the graphics to help one negotiate a nonhierarchical collage of programs. Underlying these functional critiques

Above: Mixing chamber/reference area. Courtesy of Seattle Public Library.

Below: Looking at mixing chamber. Courtesy of Seattle Public Library.



is a general disbelief that architecture (particularly modern architecture, and even more particularly radical architecture) can actually solve the problems of urban life. Most of the blog-writers imply that either more traditional spatial hierarchy, more effective security, or more privatizing technology would have provided a better use of public resources. Even Koolhaas seems to have accepted the accuracy of several of the functional critiques, such as the signage problems and the need for a broader social-service solution for the homeless population. But, as a debate about public space today, it seems more interesting to examine the disparity between some of the attitudes behind these critiques and Koolhaas's rhetoric of intentions. Intentionally similar to the "big boxes" that permeate our commercial landscape, the library's uniform skin conceals a vast diversity of cultural programs. In this case, though, instead of sheltering only a diversity of products (as at a Walmart), the building also includes a number of spaces made solely for information exchange and social interaction. The library, then, is the most literal realization of Koolhaas's long-standing obsession with heterotopic programming within a single edifice (*Delirious New York*) and the capitalist landscapes of "bigness" (*S,M,L,XL*).⁷

As compelling as Koolhaas's beliefs might be as social polemic, it would not be surprising that people might resist them in reality. In a world where people are becoming more radically individualized—by non-communal living (the suburban house), non-public transportation (the car), and non-shared technologies (any earphone-based personalized media)—experiencing such enforced "togetherness" can be unnerving, disorientating, and downright irritating.⁸ In traditional civic architecture, buildings are organized more *pictorially*. With most of their civic-ness portrayed externally, the viewer looks in from outside the "frame" at the icon itself. By contrast, in Seattle, the civic object is intentionally mute on the exterior, requiring one to be "ingested" into it.⁹ Once inside—and once again unlike traditional civic architecture—one's experience is significantly less pictorial than *picturesque*, or at least more sequential in character. As if in an interiorized version of an Olmstedian park, you must wander through the literal gardens of public space and become part of the *mise-en-scene* of urban life itself.¹⁰

Understandably, entering the diegetic frame rather than staying outside can be uncomfortable. It is not only the traditional book and library that has become threatened by

new digital and electronic media, but traditional forums of public life itself. As enthusiastically pronounced now thirty years ago by Marshall McLuhan,

The Renaissance Legacy. The Vanishing Point = Self Effacement

The Detached observer. No Involvement!

The viewer of Renaissance art is systematically placed outside the frame of experience.

A piazza for everything and everything for the piazza.

The instantaneous world of electric informational media involves all of us, all at once.

*No detachment or frame is possible.*¹¹

However, neither McLuhan nor Koolhaas see this engagement as terrifying; rather, they claim it can be empowering. Our current popular culture promotes this belief as well—as in the upswing of urban-sited sitcoms and the ubiquitous use of urban landscapes in advertising campaigns from Volkswagen Jettas to Apple iPods. These representations suggest that the city might no longer be something to escape, but something to which we should remain "connected." Nevertheless, with most of these examples, the technology exists between ourselves and the city, as if to suggest our bodies cannot be located there without it. One could argue that the Seattle Central Library is another such piece of technology.

Politics of the Interface

As an interface to the urban, the Seattle Central Library is a somewhat unprecedented architectural object. Its skin does not portray a solid separation between itself and the city, as do many pre-Modern buildings; nor does it simply mimic Modern architecture's desire to fully dissolve the distinction between inside and outside. Instead, it tries to be *both* an autonomous urban object *and* a complex microcosm of urban fabric and the digital world beyond.¹² Rhetorically, Koolhaas has embraced this binary tension between place-making object and ineffable network: "The anticipation of a looming conflict between the real and the virtual is moot at the moment where the two can be made to coincide, become each other's mirror image. The virtual can become the distributed presence of the Seattle Central Library that users find confirmed in its actual site in the city."¹³

To Koolhaas, the Seattle project sets up a dialectic between itself as an identifiable "place" (or location distinct from other places) and an open "space" (or mobile network without boundaries between the actual and the virtual).¹⁴

Opposite: Interior garden. Photo by Timothy Hursley.

Thus, the library's exterior objectifies it as a place in the city, a civic destination; yet, the inside is conceptualized as a fluid intersection of spaces through which as social actors move, rehearsing their role in civic life.

But is this what most people today want out of their civic buildings? Can Americans really feel comfortable in an unmediated public space that includes such a range of cultural, social and economic populations? Americans might conceptually accept that democracy is a messy and inclusive process ("like making sausage," as the saying goes). Yet when it comes to civic architecture, they more often than not desire less conflict and more idealization—for example, favoring historic images of civic virtue via Classicism, or future ones via new individualizing technologies (allowing virtual libraries instead of real ones). It is not a new phenomenon for Americans to find the past and the future more comforting than the here and now.

It is interesting that the rhetoric surrounding our new technology also has begun to promise the same idealized ambitions as past forms of public architecture: utopia. In the world of digital media, as exemplified in the "Anthem" television commercials for MCI: "There is no race. There is no gender. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. Utopia? No, the Internet."¹⁵ Yet, as tempting as it might be to believe this concept in a world torn apart by real and constructed conflicts, social issues will never be resolved via technology alone. As Alberto Gomez-Perez and Louis Pelletier have argued:

It may be true that the accessibility of electronic "space" adds a new dimension to the old dialectic of public and private realms, suggesting possible new forms of human interaction. Nevertheless, ...[w]e should not be naïve about the so-called public nature of cyberspace. True public space, the space of architecture, is the "space of appearance," where the facing of the Other...Bodies transformed into information are not phenomenological bodies. Although it could be argued that at the moment society's public forum is indeed the information highway, and that encounters in its nodes are fruitful, such a highway should not be construed as a substitute for the space of dialogue and erotic exchange, the space for an architecture of resistance.... The goal is hardly to pursue the dream (or nightmare) of our dissolution into networks of digitized information; it is rather to construe and build spaces that resist such a collapse.¹⁶

In simple terms, an architect can respond to this reality by representing more pictorial images of our shared

utopian ideals. Or, as in the case of the Seattle library, an architect can try to avoid the utopian and offer more literally a "platform," or in this case a series of platforms, on which we must collectively negotiate ever-present issues of class, race, and gender.¹⁷

One of the most striking spaces found in the Seattle Central Library is the tall void that skewers through several of its levels. In this almost enigmatic space, with its strange institutional vocabulary, we can find a latent critique of the role of citizens within democratic society. In the very first line of an A+U discussion of the library Koolhaas stated, "The library represents, maybe along with the *prison*, the last of the uncontested moral universes: communal accommodations for 'good' (or necessary) activities...."¹⁸

Anyone familiar with Koolhaas's past polemical writings, as well as his early unbuilt projects (such his Arnhem Prison renovation project in 1979), would know of his previous interest in the role of vision in the establishment of civic order. He was particularly vocal on the prison typology of the panopticon, in which the vision of one modulates the actions of others. This vertical space in Seattle is perhaps a latent reference to the central void of the prison panopticon. Yet here we find no guard in the guard tower, but only ourselves—each regulating our actions through the presence of another's vision. Through such reversals, where the users are both the "seers" and the "seen," we try to find a way to coexist in a more diverse and less hierarchical way.¹⁹

Enforced Interaction

If one takes a longer view of architectural and urban history, such visually organized spatial practices are not altogether radical or unprecedented. Pre-Modern perspectively based architecture often provoked similar reciprocal relationships between individual buildings and the larger city. In these past "scenarios," however, citizens activated the mobius-like blending between architectural volume and context through their daily lives.

In a sense, architecture began to lose this core agenda (i.e., helping define the larger collective urban experience through spatial/temporal phenomena) during the early part of the nineteenth century, when the forerunners to our contemporary media forms were entering their infancy.²⁰ Then, by the early twentieth century, film and photography had begun to dominate the cultural landscape, providing the majority of our collective "experiences." We can almost hear the "first kiss" of modern media's love affair with urban life in Walter Benjamin's now-infamous quote:



Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended.²¹

Early-twentieth-century films by such artists as Dziga Vertov (*Man with the Movie Camera*, 1929) and Charles Schiller (*Manhatta*, 1921) embraced the city for all its visual, spatial and temporal potentials. Yet, as these new media forms became more present in popular culture, less “experience” seemed to be demanded in architecture and urban design. Over the last one hundred years plan-

ners have largely retreated from the phenomenological intrigue of the city to the safe haven of statistics and matters of public protection and management. Meanwhile, the majority of architects became singularly obsessed with architecture itself, narrowing the discipline’s potential and disengaging from architecture’s historical role as the media form through which we experience a sense of collective life.

The significance of the Seattle Central Library is that it is decidedly ambiguous about where the life of the city and the role of architecture should begin or end. Through the sectional layering of many visually connected spaces it formally orchestrates many of the exciting qualities found when traveling through a city—the very qualities of simul-

Above: Homeless men playing chess. Photo by author.



taneity, vibrancy and voyeurism that Benjamin alluded to and that Vertov tried to mimic using documentary database structure, montage, and even multi-image collage.²² And, just as many contemporary film-makers continue to explore the city-symphony genre using multiscreen database formats to increase interactivity and more closely represent the temporal structures of urban life, the Seattle Library pushes the simultaneity of experience through multivisual exposure of different program elements. When a person engages an interactive digital installation (such as shown here with an installation of work by The Labyrinth Project), their experience is contingent on the

actions of others accessing the same database simultaneously. The same can be said for the experience of a piece of architecture like the Seattle Central Library. In both cases, one doesn't have to engage *directly* with another person to establish an expanded perception of being part of a larger collective body. But it is not an option to remain, or even to pretend to remain, fully isolated either.

It is interesting to note, as a final point, that the architects mentioned at the beginning of this article are from *the* generation which supposedly valued collective civic engagement more than any other (a.k.a. the generation of 1968). Koolhaas, Hadid, Herzog and DeMeuron, et al. are the inheritors of McLuhan's "global village"—the generation which claimed new technologies and collective art practices could democratize or open up the master narratives (as well as actual spaces) of previously privileged and cul-

Above: Interactive Exhibit. Courtesy of Kristy Kang and USC's The Labyrinth Project.

turally isolated institutions. Yet, forty years later, we realize that most of the once-radical visual strategies and technological advances of the sixties and seventies have simply been co-opted for the sake of capital exchange rather than social change. In new civic works like the Seattle Central Library, however, we can see significant attempts to reverse this condition by offering something reality TV shows, IM technologies, and Internet chat rooms can only mimic: *actual social exchange in real time and space*. Though Koolhaas's initial training as a screenwriter has often been noted, his Seattle project suggests that this connection to media culture in fact now transcends the linear narratives and scenographic strategies of film structure alone, involving new references to the potentially more interactive strategies of the digital age. Most importantly, this engagement with contemporary visual culture has occurred not by *reducing* architecture to a mere backdrop for the digital, but by once again employing the spatial and temporal tactics natural to it to engage us more fully in collective life.

Notes and Acknowledgements

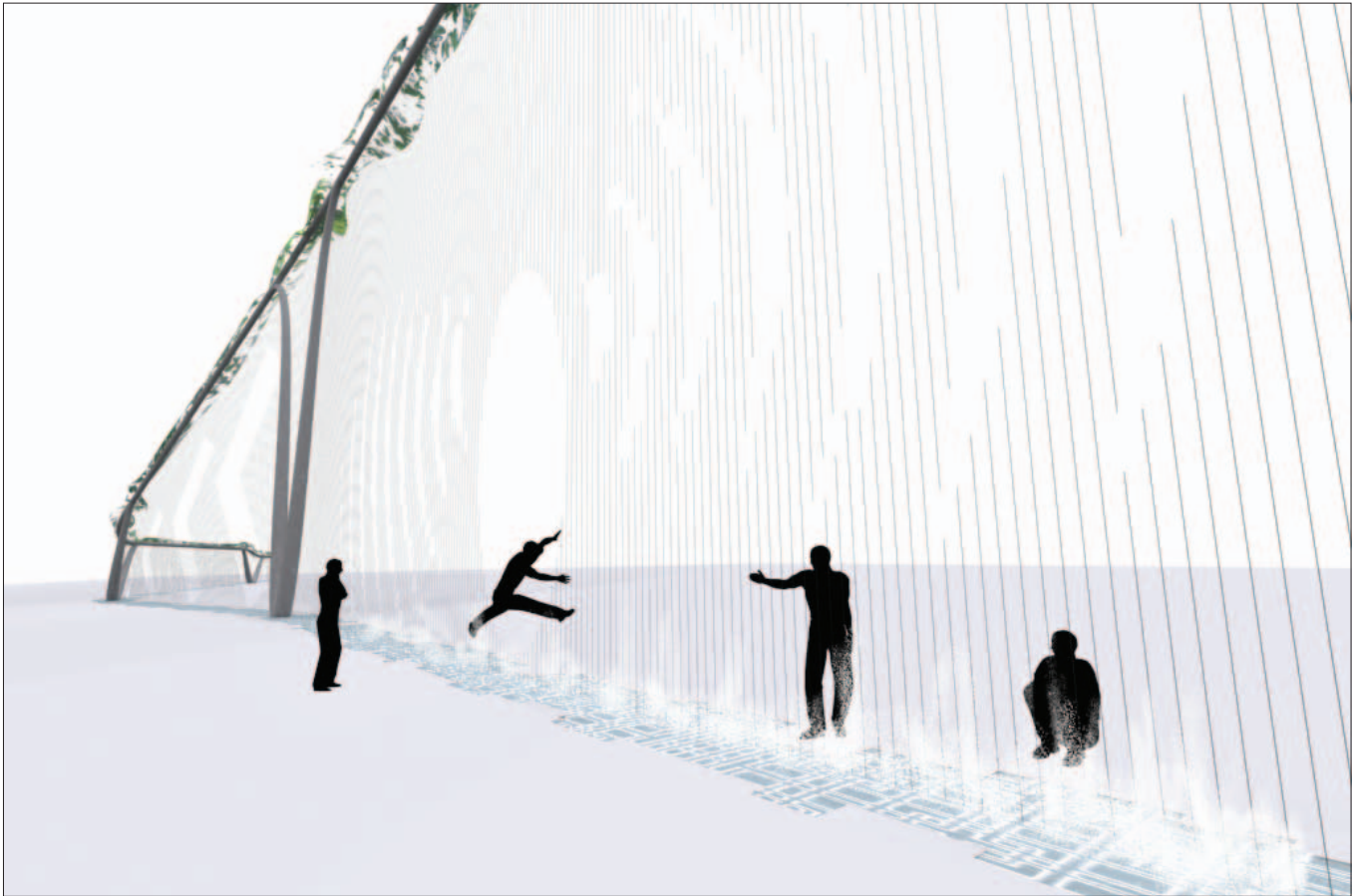
I would like to thank two of my USC colleagues: Robert Harris for making urban life seem endlessly generous, and Francisco Arias for our several clarifying conversations regarding Koolhaas during the writing of this article.

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2. The uproar over product placement in the fictional spaces of movies and TV seems a bit absurd to me considering our complacency toward product placement in real spaces.
3. Rem Koolhaas, *OMA@Work*, Nobuyuki Yoshida, ed. (Tokyo: A+U, 2000), p. 84.
4. Sheri Olson, "Seattle Central Library, Seattle," *Architectural Record* (July 2004), p. 89.
5. Tom Haines, "Seattle Still Percolates Behind this Artful Project," *Boston Globe*, August 21, 2005.
6. Koolhaas, *OMA@Work*, p. 84.
7. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995).
8. "Togetherness" is a word that proved irritating even to Jane Jacobs. See Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), pp. 55-73.
9. The choice of the word "ingest" makes reference to John Hedjuk's claim that the difference between architecture and sculpture is that architecture *ingests* people.
10. This distinction between the picturesque and the pictorial grows out of a similar distinction first made by Yve-Alain Bois, in reference to Richard Serra, in his article "A Picturesque Stroll Around Clara Clara," *October*, No. 29 (1984).

11. McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium is the Message*, p. 53.
12. This seems similar to the "both/and" strategy of Venturi rather than the "either/or" strategy of standard Modernism. See Robert Venturi, "Inside/Outside," in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977).
13. Koolhaas, *OMA@Work*, p. 84.
14. See Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). "A place (lieu) is the order...[in] which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place)...it implies an indication of stability. A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements....On this view, in relation to place, space is like a word when it is spoken...in contradistinction to place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a 'proper.' In short, space is a practiced place." (p. 117)
15. See Lisa Nakamura's discussion of colonial tendencies of the internet and technology, in "Where Do You Want to Go Today: Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet and Transnationality," in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 255-63.
16. Alberto Perez-Gomez and Louise Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), p. 382.
17. This is true to Olmsted's Central Park as well, with its intentionally non-Classical structure and its series of picturesque and intentionally nonfunctionalized scenarios or places for social exchange across classes and races.
18. Koolhaas, *OMA@Work*, p. 84.
19. An opening-day newspaper feature included coverage of how the design of the library reflected the reality of the homeless population, stating that "Homeless people need the library at least as much as others, if not more." The article continued, "The new building will have working security cameras and it was designed with more open spaces and clear lines of sight." Rebekah Denn, "Special Feature," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 20, 2004, p. F10.
20. Alberto Perez Gomez and Louis Pelletier argue that this point occurred most precisely after 1830, with the redefinition of the public "subject" after the French Revolution. "Architecture was threatened by both sides: by engineers and sociologists, whose disciplines were endowed with greater rational certainty, and by new art forms such as photography and film, which acknowledged better the political 'reorganization' of the nineteenth-century observer." See *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge*, p. 83.
21. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations/Walter Benjamin* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 236.
22. For more on the relationship between new and older database orders from Vertov to the present digital age, see Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001). For a slightly alternative view, focusing more on our lasting impulses for narrativity in the digital database age, see Marsha Kinder's "Design as Database," in Jeffery Shaw and Peter Wiebel, eds., *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary After Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 342-53.

Zaragoza's Digital Mile: Place-Making in a New Public Realm

Dennis Frenchman and Francisca Rojas



As the hot desert sun wanes across the plaza, horizontal shades along the roof of the museum, over the café, and at the bus stop suddenly rise in a graceful ballet. Pivoting upwards one at a time, they become a row of vertical screens. Gradually, they take on the subtle, complex patterns of a Moorish mosaic, a backdrop for the evening's performance. On the lawn, as the last soccer players leave, people settle down on their chairs and blankets and turn to the stage.

Two kids take a running leap at the curtain of water, but it parts before they can get wet. Landing in a puddle on the other side, the sound starts a wave down the curtain that ripples along and fades in the distance. Jump twice and you get a bigger wave; jump in syncopation and you get the biggest waves of all.

Such experiments in place-making are now being designed for the ancient city of Zaragoza, Spain, as part of an unusual development project that will herald the city's arrival into the information age. Known as the Digital Mile, the project aims to incorporate digital media into everyday aspects of the public realm, making places that respond to their users, change to accommodate multiple activities, provide stories, information and services, and hopefully, become deeply meaningful to a rich array of people in Zaragoza who will live and learn within them.

At first glance, Zaragoza is an unusual venue for experiments with digital media. One of Spain's oldest cities, it was founded by Caesar Augustus at a strategic location on the Ebro River in the middle of a desert. Later it became

Above: Waterwall: An urban-scaled interactive fountain system in which falling streams of water can respond to people by digital means. Image by Andres Sevtsuk.



a stronghold of the Moors; then capital of the Christian Kingdom of Aragon, which stretched into Italy. Today it is a fast-growing university and intellectual center of 750,000 people.

Over the centuries inhabitants of the city have drawn on their predecessors, maintaining a remarkable continuity of expression and culture. The city's physical fabric is a palimpsest of Roman ruins, Arabic decorations, intimate streets, and grand public spaces, overlooked by a collection of fantastic Baroque towers. This layering of form and ideas is poignantly embodied in the Aljaferia, a palace of Moorish and Christian kings, and the current seat of the Aragon regional government.

Today a new layer of culture is being added to Zaragoza with the completion of a high-speed rail line, bringing the city within commuting distance of Barcelona and Madrid. Signaling this future, an enormous new rail station has recently opened in the Almozara area on the western edge of town, bringing new people, firms, and real estate speculation. Meanwhile, the old in-town rail station at Portillo has been demolished, and tracks between the two sites have been placed underground, freeing a mile-long swath of highly valuable land. The transformation of this corridor with new development will begin at its outer edge, along the banks of the Ebro River, where Zaragoza will host an International Expo in 2008 dedicated to the theme of water.

Mayor Juan Alberto Belloch originally conceived the Digital Mile as a project to harness his city's increased accessibility and visibility. Among his strategic urban and economic development goals were to create a global identity for Zaragoza; assert the city as a regional center for technological innovation; build local skills in the use and

development of information technology; activate urban spaces that are currently underutilized; and express the evolving history and culture of Zaragoza.

In the fall of 2005 the city joined with a team of researchers from MIT's Joint Program in City Design and Development and the Media Lab to create a vision for the Digital Mile. Guided by an advisory panel of sociologists and designers, the team focused on the potentials of advanced communications and media technology in the public realm rather than in buildings and private development.

The study encompassed an area extending from Portillo and Aljaferia to the high-speed rail station and out to the Expo site—linking the fabric of the old city with the new. Existing plans for the area called mainly for conventional open spaces and public facilities. However, the introduction of the technology theme raised some interesting potentials and questions. Can technology enhance public use and enjoyment? Can it make space more productive? Or meaningful? What types of urban forms best accommodate the transmutable qualities of digital media? Can it create a public realm that is more flexible and adaptable to different users, activities, or moods? How do you develop content for the media, and who should manage it?

This article discusses these questions in the context of the Digital Mile and illustrates some of the urban design hardware, media software, and content proposed for this unique place.

Above: Old Zaragoza: A fabric of water, bridges, towers, walls and layers.
Photo by Felix Bernad.



The “Open-Source” City

The nature of digital public space is just beginning to be understood. Although there are now many examples of digital media in public places, such as large digital screens and wireless access to the Internet, the experience of these places remains pretty much unchanged. A truly digital space would bring together multiple layers of media within a responsive physical enclosure. In other words, the physical form must be able to change and respond to information, much like media, and the media must become instrumental in shaping its form. The challenge of the Digital Mile was to approach this ideal in simple, realizable ways to create good public spaces—adding to the collection the city already has.

Above: Aerial view of the Digital Mile project site. Old train station site at Portillo (right); the new high speed rail station at Almozara (left). Expo 2008 site lies across the Ebro River (top). Photo courtesy of City of Zaragoza.

An inherent advantage of a digital realm is that different needs can be accommodated by urban spaces that are flexible and changeable, making them responsive to different circumstances. These changes might be achieved by enabling conventional physical alterations in the landscape. But they can also be realized through programmable digital elements that can change the visual and physical quality and content of a space with the time of day, season or activity. Thus, for example, on a Saturday afternoon in the summer, strollers and soccer players may use a park for recreation, while in the evening it may be transformed into an outdoor theater with screens and sound. Enabling users to influence, even shape, these changes creates a more dynamic, participatory, “open-source” environment.

The concept of open source comes from the field of computer programming. It stipulates that anyone can modify and reorganize the source code for a piece of software. Through people’s adjustments and improvements, software thus evolves to better respond to users’ needs. In

keeping with the project's overarching theme of creating an "open-source city," this was precisely the goal of the Digital Mile.

It was imagined that an open-source approach to the development of content and use of digital media along the Mile would serve several purposes. It might help break down people's fear of technology by being a means of technological capacity-building. It might create a sense of ownership of the Mile for Zaragoza's residents. Moreover, it might provide a means through which people could construct and reveal narratives about the city's culture, functions and history. Of course, since the Mile will be a networked environment, remote development of content is also possible. That is to say, people could conceivably access, experience and contribute to the development of Zaragoza's Digital Mile from anywhere in the world. This means that content might also be produced at a global scale and expressed in the physical environment at a local scale, making the Digital Mile a place that defies political boundaries.

Once articulated, such an open-source concept seemed readily applicable to the design of urban places. Throughout history the public realm has combined physical form with mediums of expression. Great public space is a form of theater that needs a good stage set, that is human scaled and comfortable, surrounded by supportive activities and architectural enclosures. Great public spaces also enable personal and public communications and exchange of goods, information, emotions and ideas—and therefore become imbued with meaning for the people who claim them, and for the cities in which they are located.

Advanced communications and digital media are today providing new ways of achieving these traditional characteristics in an open-source way. Perhaps the most obvious example involves application to elements of spatial enclosure. Digital displays are now being incorporated into the facades of buildings—not as signs, but as integral aspects of architecture, very much like the polychrome tile decoration on the cathedral facade in Zaragoza (itself, a form of "media"). However, new digital media allow the visual surfaces of urban space to change: in pattern or color, to carry messages, or to show motion pictures. And the really interesting aspect here does not just concern dramatic new uses of media, but the fact that the quality and mood and content of the space can be altered with the time of day, season, or—if accessible by the Internet—the present desire of users.

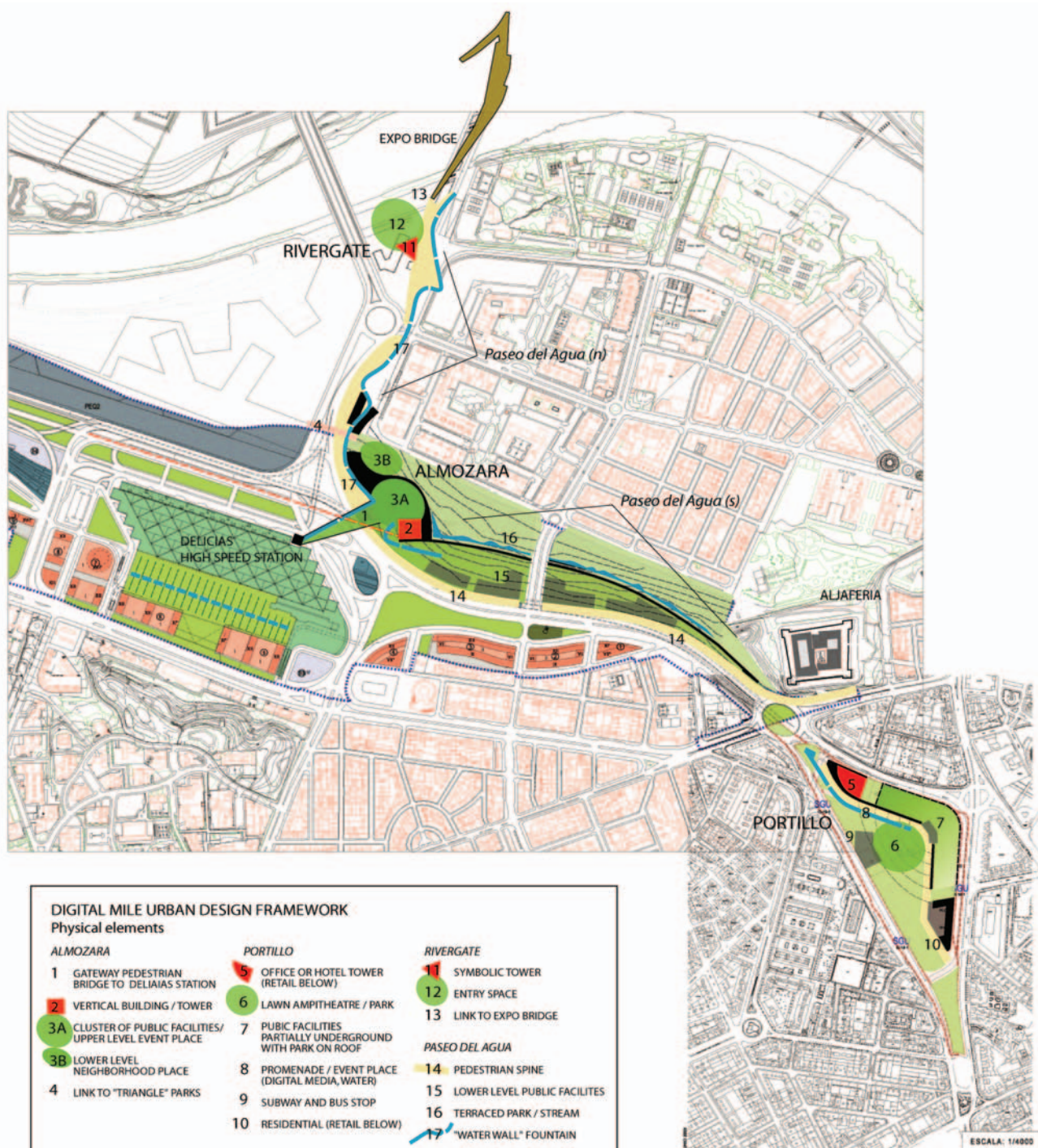
A second example involves the ubiquitous presence of wireless access to the Internet. Of course, this is the key to accessing the responsive elements described above. But

it can also add a layer of functionality to public spaces and parks, enabling them to be used for work, education, and other activities that increasingly rely on access to electronic information. Equally important is the ability to deliver tailored content over this medium to specific groups in particular, prescribed locations. This is possible through location-based wireless services. For example, visitors may be able to access information related to history, tours, and nearby restaurants at certain sites (or on certain streets) and nowhere else. Such a role might be likened to that of traditional public spaces like the forum, where people might go to get information about politics; or the marketplace, where they might get information about commerce. Such digital spaces would eventually become important nodes within the larger network of information and flows.

A final example involves the incorporation of digital capabilities into the everyday objects of the city. This, too, has always occurred in traditional public spaces—as awnings are unfurled when it rains, or decorations are put up for celebrations. But digital space can be far more sensitive to the needs of users. In particular, street furniture—lights, tables, awnings, umbrellas, decorations and fountains—can play a key role in making space responsive. The capabilities of these urban elements are now being reconceived to enhance the use and experience of urban spaces. For example, light fixtures are being designed to sense and respond to the time of day or the number of users nearby, providing general illumination when there are large crowds, more intimate lighting for cafe patrons, or colored lights during a special event. Outdoor cafe tables might also be designed to allow patrons to call up a menu on an electronic surface, view reviews of the dishes, explore sites in Zaragoza to plan a tour of the city, or access personal messages before the food is served. All of this will be facilitated in the near future by the advent of radio frequency identification (RFID) tags that will communicate information to the furniture about you and the level of access you desire.

Complementary Frameworks: The Physical and the Digital

The Digital Mile offers both great opportunities and difficult challenges to create a unified, imageable, and transformative project. A key problem is that new physical infrastructure, including the high-speed rail station and planned roadways will divide up the area, separating its parts from each other and the rest of the city. The overall concept of the design, then, has been to visually and functionally knit disparate elements together through



Above: Digital Mile Physical Framework incorporates the Portillo, Almozara and Rivergate development/activity nodes, connected by Paseo del Agua. Image by Dennis Frenchman.

Opposite: Digital Mile Digital Framework includes different layers of media systems overlaid onto the physical design framework. Image by Dennis Frenchman.

a network of community and educational facilities, public spaces that serve multiple users, and digital features. We see this task as equal to the creation of the other great works of urban design that have given Zaragoza its powerful urban character. Elements of the proposal include both physical components (the “hardware” of the project) and digital components (the “software”).

Physical Elements

From examining the development of Zaragoza, it became apparent that certain elements have been integral to the fabric and culture of this city for centuries, including *water* (connecting to the natural environment); *bridges* (linking places and ideas); *towers* (providing a unique image and voice); *walls* (defining edges, inside and out); and *layers* (of culture, information and landscape).

The Digital Mile utilizes and reinterprets this ancient code of form. The design organizes elements along a pathway called the Paseo del Agua because of its innovative uses of water. The Paseo is anchored by two event places marked with towers: Portillo and Almozara. At Almozara, a spectacular new pedestrian bridge will connect the Digital Mile to the high-speed rail station and neighborhoods to the south and west. The pedestrian bridge will become a symbolic gateway to Zaragoza, spanning the highway that leads into the city from Madrid. The Paseo del Agua continues northward to the Expo 2008 site, which is accessed by a second pedestrian bridge across the Ebro River. Together, the pathway, bridges, towers and event places will knit together the Digital Mile and provide an armature for many uses.

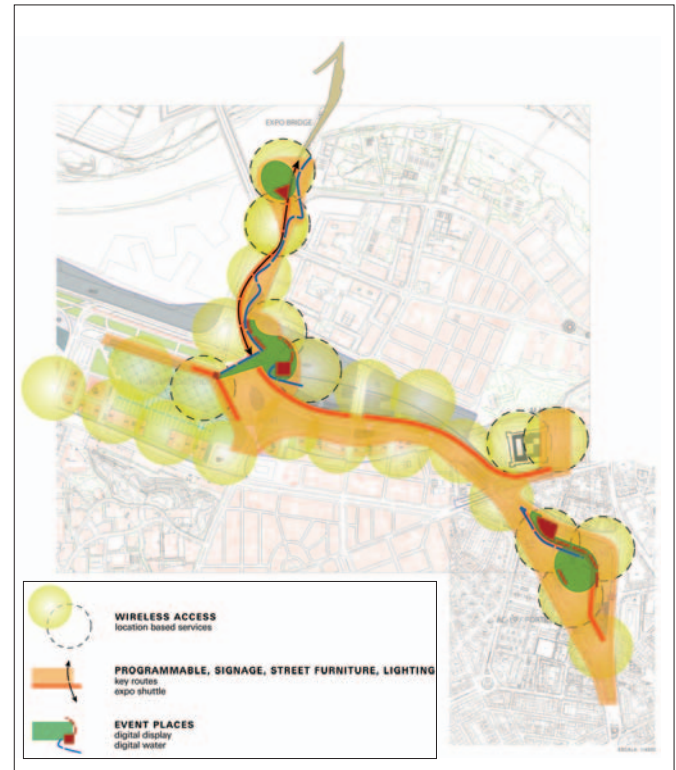
Digital Elements

A proposed digital framework overlays and completes the physical framework, and is composed of three parts.

Ambient technology. All of the spaces, parks and buildings in the Digital Mile will include free, public wireless connectivity to the Internet as well as access to responsive media elements on the Mile. Location-based services will provide tailored content through cell phones or personal digital assistants (PDAs) to subscribers at key spots—providing, for example, historical interpretation at the Aljaferia or directions at the train station.

Systems. Digital systems will facilitate the public use and understanding of the environment, and will be concentrated along the pedestrian armature of the Mile. Proposed systems include intelligent street and building lights that can be accessed and programmed to change color or intensity in response to the time of day, demands for use, or artistic desires. Digital street furniture—cafe tables, bus stops, signage—will display information about food content, where your bus is located, or available parking spaces.

Digital Places. Nodes on the Digital Mile will include responsive elements that support different activities and facilitate users' personal association with the urban environment. Elements proposed for the Mile include digital facades, moveable physical elements that can provide shade



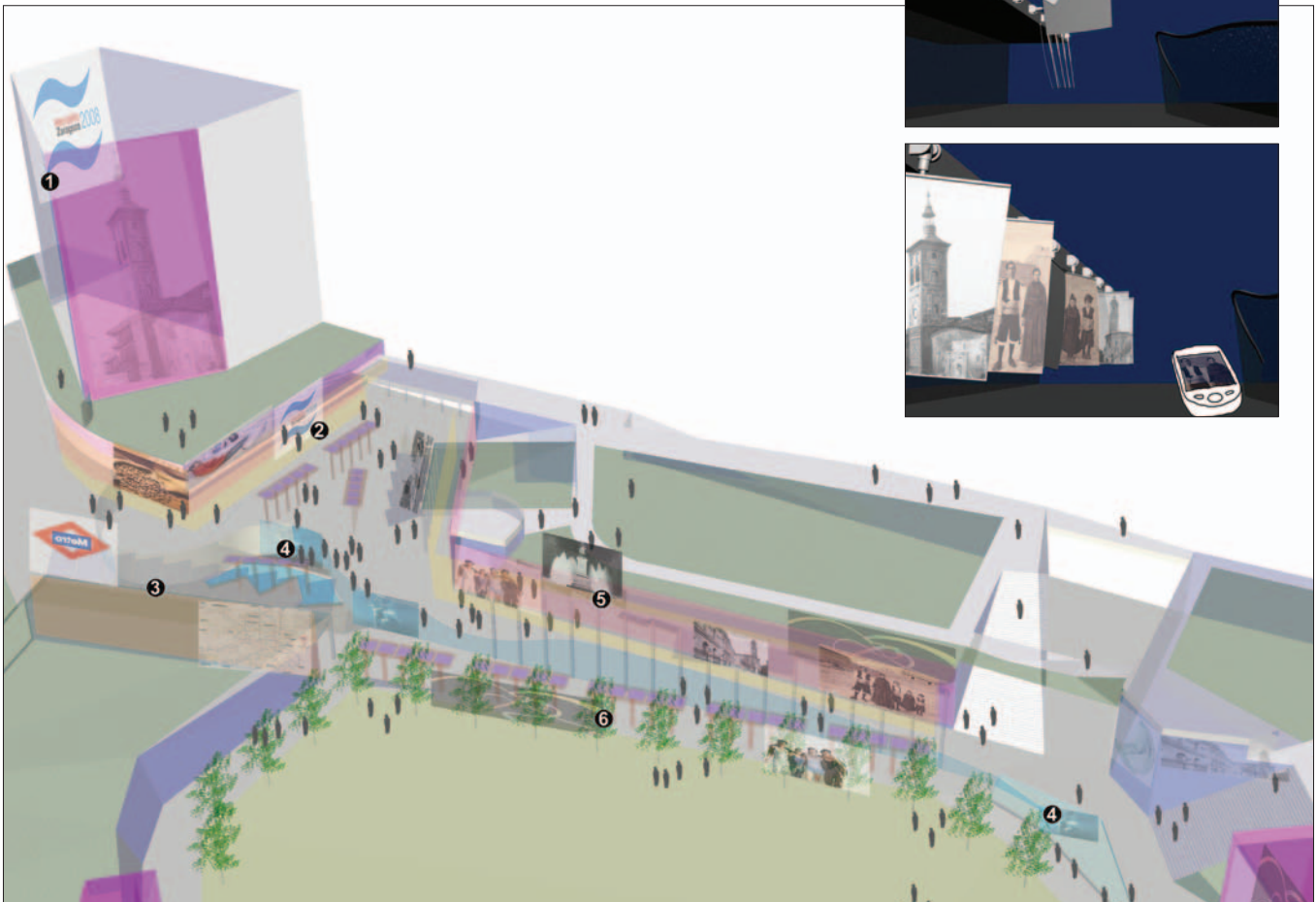
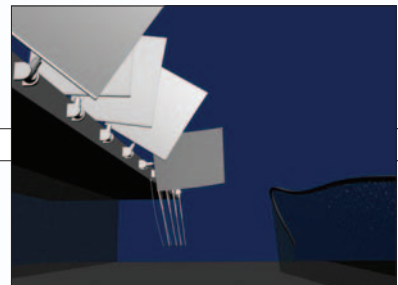
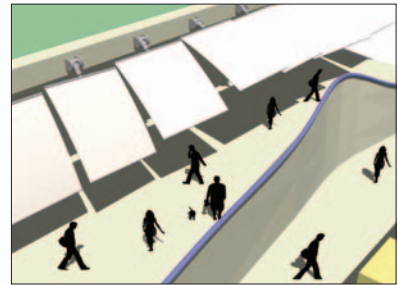
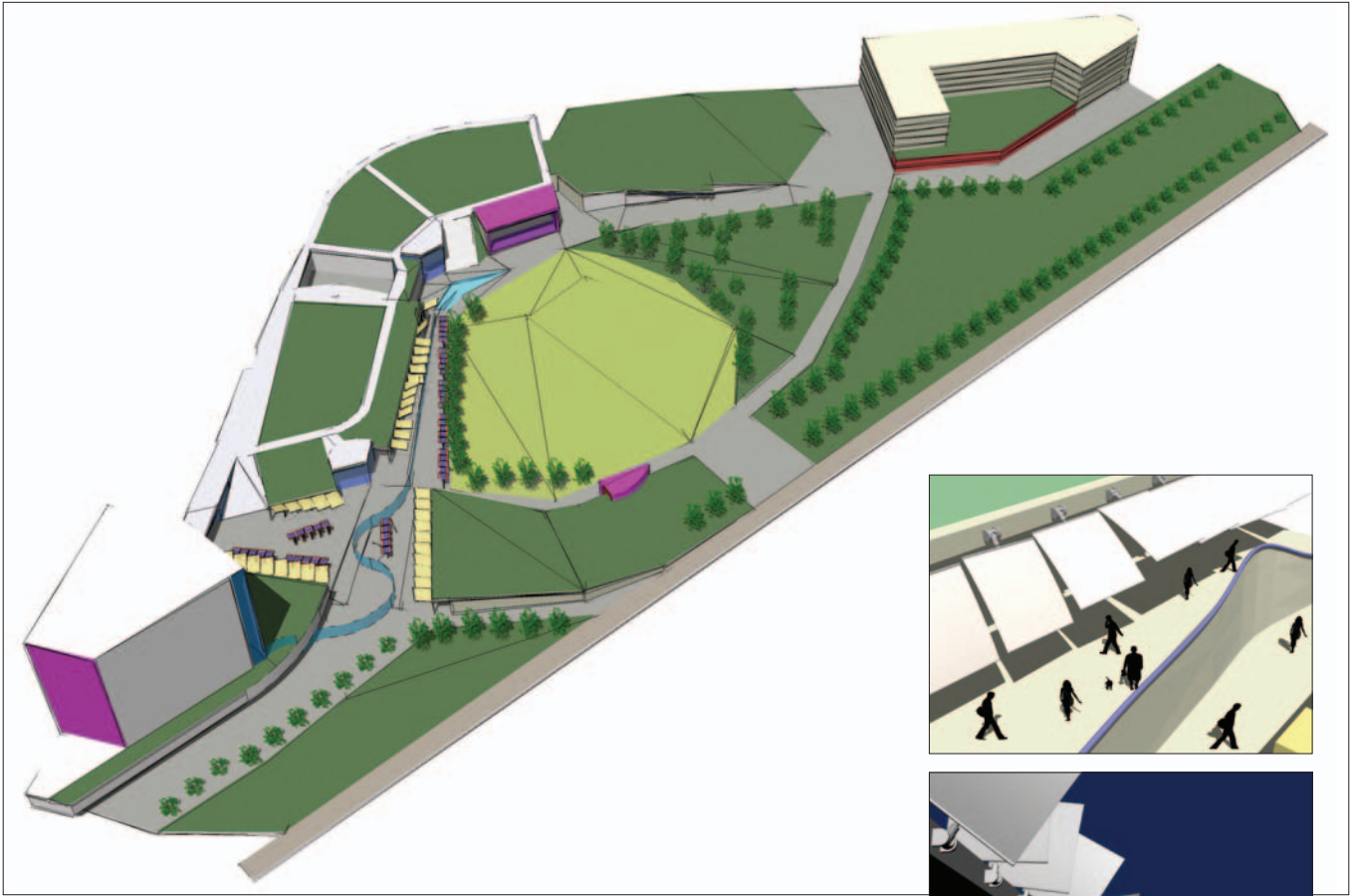
or modify spaces along the edges of buildings, paving that reflects patterns of use, a “waterwall” that responds to ambient conditions and human interaction, and urban light pixels that delineate the edges of space.

A Neighborhood Place

The proposed spaces at Portillo and Almozara illustrate how physical and digital elements can come together to make new kinds of urban places.

Portillo is one of the most historic and culturally significant locations in the city, at the eastern gate of Zaragoza, once protected by the Aljaferia. It is also the site of the former train station, surrounded by a dense fabric of historic apartment buildings, hotels, factories and offices. Political negotiations over its future were contentious, with many interests claiming that their needs should be met there. The challenge was to create truly useable spaces that could serve different constituencies—neighborhood residents, school children, Aljaferia tourists, working commuters, and other Zaragozans—at different times.

To satisfy this competing collection of needs, the design calls for Portillo to be primarily a neighborhood park, but to also include extensive public facilities, a private office



tower, and residential development. The project will accommodate passive recreation, organized sports, playgrounds, a community center, a citywide performance and meeting venue, and the Museum of the Mile, which will engage school children and their parents with digital culture. It will also be the location of a new subway and bus station.

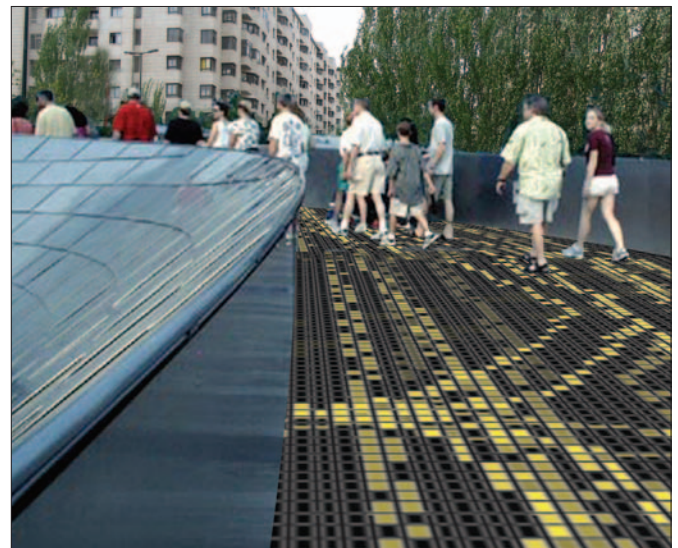
All these uses will be accommodated through an innovative design that layers activities vertically within a constructed landscape. Along the northern edge of the site, the museum, community center, and a multiuse pavilion will be situated partially underground so that functional green spaces can flow up and across their vegetated roofs, providing more park area. A lawn at the center of the park will slope gently downward toward the edge of these facilities, where a promenade will be created. This edge will be a place of transition where people can stroll, and where different uses can spill out of the buildings onto the sidewalk. Along the promenade, paths of movement intersect at a key place between the office tower, museum, and subway entrance. This space is linked to the Aljaferia and overlooked by the upper levels of the rooftop park, creating a prime location for social activities and media. We envision a humanely scaled digital place where people can move to and from the subway, sit at outdoor cafe tables, watch kids playing in a fountain, view shows about Zaragoza, monitor the functions of the city, and dance on Saturday evenings.

Different activities would be nurtured by a responsive setting that will include digital awnings that can move in various directions, providing shade, dividing spaces for outdoor activities, or becoming surfaces for projection; programmable waterwall fountains that can respond to the people around them; memory paving that can sense and illuminate paths of movement; and display surfaces incorporated into facades and furniture that can be accessed by users.

These features may come into play in different ways at different times to make a gentle but highly responsive space. It might, for example, change with the weather, time of day, or nature of users; or its content might be designed by artists or school children experimenting in the museum, or by guests from the Web, anywhere in the world.

A Regional Place

The complement to Portillo is Almozara, situated across from the high-speed rail station. Almozara will be one of the most prominent sites in Zaragoza, visible to incoming traffic from Madrid, train and bus patrons, and virtually every visitor to the Expo 2008 site. The opportunity exists to create a powerful gateway to Zaragoza at this location, providing a new image for city.



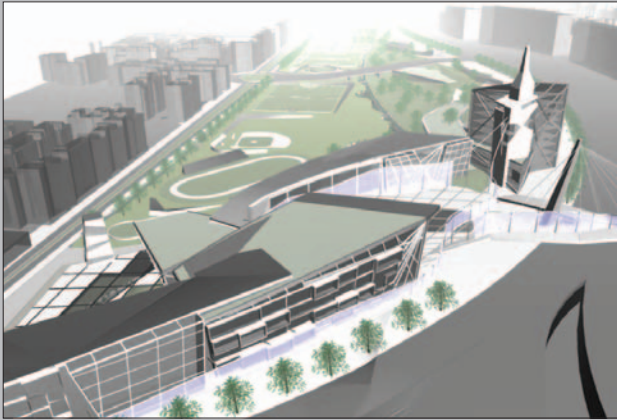
Above: Portillo: Memory paving uses digitally responsive ground surfacing to record footfalls of pedestrians, displaying how pathways are reinforced by multiple trips. Luminescence accretes into lines and spaces: one passage would be invisible; multiple passages would be rewarded, encouraging pedestrians to examine pathways and try new ones. Images by Rajesh Kottamasu.

Opposite Above: Portillo: The site, top, features a sequence of open spaces surrounded by digitally mediated facades. Images by Michal Stangel.

Opposite Below: Digital space, bottom, incorporates media into pavement, wall surfaces, building edges and street furniture to create a layered, responsive environment. Images by Michal Stangel.

Opposite Inset: "Digital awnings," right, moveable screens that accommodate different images, uses, and audiences. Images by Michal Stangel.

Research into Digital Places



The use of digital media to enhance public space has been an expanding research agenda of MIT's City Design and Development (CDD) group in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, in collaboration with the Media Lab's Smart Cities group, the Center for Real Estate, and the Department of Architecture. Such collaborations are essential, since the topic of digital space is inherently interdisciplinary.

Research on the Digital Mile has drawn on earlier work at MIT, including: *Urban Narratives*, a study of how digital media can help in "making the city speak"; design of the Seoul Digital Media City and Street, in Korea, featuring intelligent building facades, signage, and pedestrian spaces (<http://dmc.seoul.go.kr/english/index.jsp>); *Event Places*, which studied programmable spaces across the U.S. and Europe (*Places*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Fall 2004); and *New Century Cities*, an international symposium on digital place-making and development. (<http://mit.edu/cre/research/ncc/symposium.html>).

The Digital Mile project was led at MIT by co-principal investigators Dennis Frenchman and William J. Mitchell. Faculty included Michael Joroff and Carlo Ratti. Research Assistants were Daniel Berry, Rajesh Kottamasu, Francisca Rojas, Susanne Seitingner, Andres Sevtsuk, Pryanka Shah, Michal Stangel, Matt Trimble, Jacob Wegmann, and Albert Wei. The research was funded by the City of Zaragoza under direction of Jose Carlos Arnal, Assistant to the Mayor, and Ricardo Caverio, City Councilman and Director of Technology.

The Advisory Committee for the project includes William J. Mitchell (Chair), François Bar, Manuel Castells, Dennis Frenchman, Peter Hall, Pekka Himanen, Michael Joroff, Veronique Kleck, Guido Martinotti, and

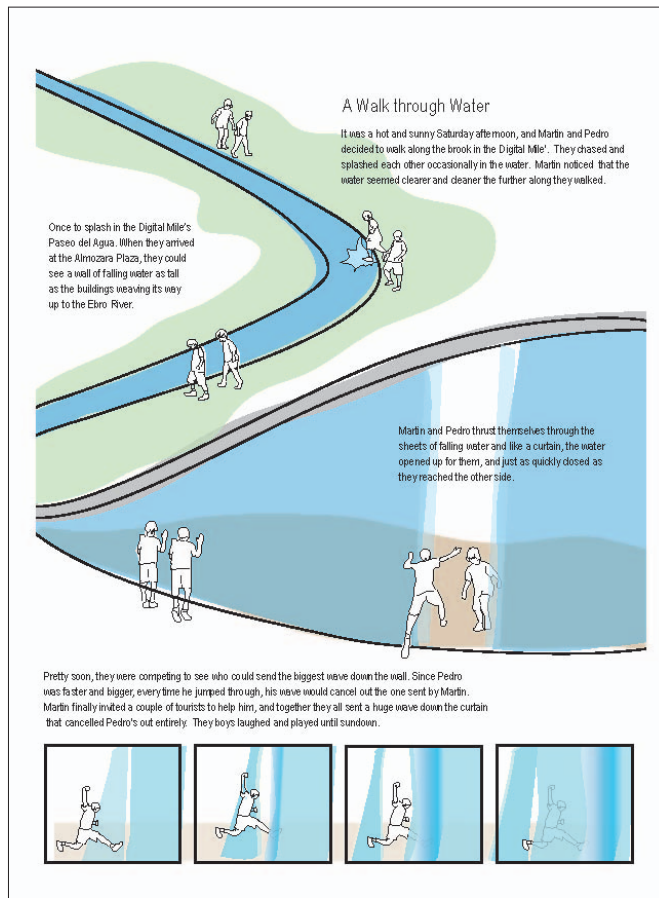
In this context, the design imagines physical and digital elements that combine to play a more assertive role, defining an image for Zaragoza within its traditional vocabulary of form. Most dramatically, a system of waterwalls will extend for a thousand feet in front of buildings and across the pedestrian bridge, its scale making it visible to speeding cars on the highway. The system will be fed from a landmark water tower, which will collect and cleanse storm runoff from the roof of the rail station and from nearby highways—utilizing a wasted resource that now flows untreated into the Ebro. Originating from the tower, the waterwalls twist and dive, capable of displaying patterns or images and defining three-dimensional space, and providing an urban design element like the great fountains of Rome or a Christo installation.

Regional development at Almozara will include a business center, high-tech offices, research facilities, and the Aragon School of Media Arts and Sciences. This new institution will provide instructional space for students and living/laboratory space for professional artists. The school is envisioned as the centerpiece of the Digital Mile, bringing the city's long tradition in the visual arts and higher learning together with digital technology and culture. Students and faculty there will also play an important curatorial role by helping program the open-source media along the Mile. The building itself is one of these elements: its studios will face the train station and oncoming traffic, providing artists an opportunity to orchestrate digital displays.

These facilities will define a unique event place at Almozara—at the crossroads of commuters flowing to the station, visitors moving to the river along the Paseo del Agua, and residents making use of parks and recreation facilities. The physical place will be surrounded by galleries, meeting and exhibition spaces, and waterwalls on three sides, allowing it to change form and texture. As such, it is envisioned as a digital showcase, an extension of the School of Media Arts and Sciences, and a venue for experimental installations of environmental art.

Above: Almozara: Proposed gateway to Zaragoza, showing bridge, tower and plaza. Waterwall moves through and defines space: passing by School of Media Arts and Sciences, lower left; visible from highway, lower right. Image by Albert Wei.

Opposite: Scenarios such as these helped to visualize the potentials of digital space: water and graffiti walls. Images by Rajesh Kottamasu.



Thoughts about Urban Design

The framework for the Digital Mile proposed in the research has now been adopted by the City of Zaragoza, and the first digital space will be constructed at Rivergate, the main entrance plaza of Expo 2008 along the Ebro River. Further development of the Digital Mile will follow.

Several observations can be made about the project as an effort to combine physical and digital place-making. First, the exercise drew upon many individual experiments being made by other designers of architecture, landscape and the city, including efforts to create narrative spaces, green roofs, and digital displays of one kind or another. These elements fit together with surprising ease in the Digital Mile plan, leading us to believe that they represent different aspects of an emerging paradigm for urban public space. In this paradigm, buildings, landscape and media lose their traditional boundaries and meld into a layered cityscape of fine-grained places, visual images, and multiple shifting activities.

In some cases, like Almozara and Portillo, the develop-

ment may be quite dense; but it is still layered, serving multiple groups with changeable places that are both urban and “natural” at the same time. This fabric is inherently more sustainable than traditional development, with less runoff and more efficient use of land and energy. And it is potentially more livable, allowing opportunities for recreation, learning, living and working to exist in close proximity.

Finally, we discovered there were opportunities for great beauty in the system. The simple devices proposed for the Mile, when taken together and animated through “open-source” software, offer an extraordinary organic quality, responding to light, people and events with subtlety and imagination. They provide the basis for a new kind of public realm.

Outside the Frame: A Critical Analysis of Urban Image Surveys

Phoebe Crisman



Aided by digital technology, designers and planners are making ever greater use of photographic images to depict and envision proposals for urban change. Yet, even as such presentations have become increasingly central to community planning efforts, the methods for employing photographs and their precise construction have not been adequately analyzed.

Discussing the new reliance on imaging techniques in architecture, Cambridge Professor Andrew Saint recently noted, “the long-term challenge for the architectural profession...is to ride this exciting, undisciplined, licentious, and dangerous beast, to control this irresponsible lust for image that pervades our culture.”¹

Several imaging methods have gained widespread currency in the design of public places. This essay specifically examines what have become known as urban image surveys. The inclusive and participatory intentions of

these methods are laudable, as is their emphasis on well-designed physical environments. But the predominance of image over bodily experience; the exclusion of intertwined socioeconomic, historical and political specificity; and the commodification of place they engender all raise serious concerns.

Technique for Community Engagement

Perhaps the most widespread image-survey methodology today is the Visual Preference Survey (VPS), trademarked by Anton Nelessen and first tested in 1979.² Residents of a town or neighborhood are shown a fast-paced sequence of photographic images and asked to rate each numerically as “acceptable” or “unacceptable.” Tabulated and analyzed survey results lead to the attachment of a calculated value for each photograph, while an optional questionnaire elicits marketing and demographic information and written comments. According to Nelessen, the process is intended to “articulate the residents’ impression of the present community image and build consensus for its future character. The

Above: +6.1 This mixed-use boulevard from Denver was the highest-rated image in the street category of the survey.

conclusion of the process is called a Vision Plan.”³

A second popular methodology, Community Image Survey (CIS) has been developed by the Center for Livable Communities (CLS). Their website describes it as follows:

*The Community Image Survey consists of forty slides from a community or region. Approximately eighty percent of the slides come from the specific locale in which the survey is administered. Taken as a whole, the forty slides present contrasting images of our living environment—its streets, houses, stores, office buildings, parks, open space and key civic features.*⁴

Numbers on how many such image surveys have been conducted are unavailable, but A. Nelessen Associates has estimated that approximately 50,000 people had filled out VPS sheets by 1994. It is likewise difficult to determine precisely when the desire to quantify image “appropriateness” or “likeability” began, since several practitioners developed processes for evaluating visual appearance simultaneously.⁵

A key intent of image surveys, however, has been to facilitate community involvement in placemaking. According to the Center for Livable Communities:

*The Community Image Survey is a powerful planning and public participation tool that can help decision-makers and their constituents. Rather than using words to describe places, the Survey uses visual images to help people better understand crucial planning elements and make more informed, proactive decisions about creating places where they want to live, work, shop and play.*⁶

As a tool for community involvement, however, the trouble with such surveys lies in the definition of what constitutes a place. Sense of place incorporates a range of engaged bodily experiences, not merely passive appreciation of visual imagery. Image-based approaches to urban planning thus run the risk of fostering an inattentiveness to—and subsequent undervaluing of—socioeconomic, historical and political realities.

Aristotle and Heidegger once bestowed place with important symbolic and political values representing the structure of social relations, or the *res publica*.⁷ How can one truly understand and rate an urban place without knowing more about what lies outside the frame—realities that cannot be captured by the camera?

The predominance of vision creates other problems. Understanding place involves multisensory experience in

time. Describing the impact of contemporary ocularcentrism, Juhani Pallasmaa has argued that the senses are not independent, but interactive and synergetic.⁸ He has also suggested that peripheral vision may be as important to spatial experience as focused vision.⁹ By contrast, texture, sound, weight, and bodily measure all disappear from image surveys, resulting in a severely limited perception of place.

While photo surveys thus aspire to engage “outsiders”—especially those unfamiliar with more technically demanding methods of environmental evaluation—their worthy intent may compromise their basis as “science.” As decontextualized images, they may simply leave too much outside the frame.

A Case Study

While a quick Web search yields hundreds of examples of urban image surveys, this essay examines one case with which the author has first-hand experience. The Milwaukee Downtown Plan, prepared for the City of Milwaukee by A. Nelessen Associates in 1999, employed a “Public Visioning Process” based on a Visual Preference Survey.

Over a period of three and one-half months, more than 1,600 Milwaukee residents viewed a rapidly timed sequence of 230 simulated images and carefully framed photographs of existing local, national and international urban conditions, including scenes from Venice, Denver, Boston and Sacramento. Using a computer scan sheet, participants numerically rated each image from +10 to -10 as “appropriate and acceptable or inappropriate and unacceptable” for their city. In a subsequent “Visual Translation Workshop” conducted over three days, participants were then asked to locate appropriate sites for applying the positive VPS images.

On reflection, it became apparent that this process had several critical weaknesses. Most obviously, apart from a brief “Demographic, Market and Policy Questionnaire,” participants were given little context for understanding broader socioeconomic, historical, racial, cultural or political conditions beneath the images’ surface—especially those showing scenes from places other than Milwaukee.

But the image-survey methodology also did not explicitly acknowledge that *all* photographs—whether family snapshots or “fine art”—are actively configured constructions of the referent (the thing to which they refer), and so can never be evaluated as stand-ins for absent realities. Instead, the carefully framed image-survey scenes deliberately sought to establish an apparently unmediated tableau—a city of isolated, picturesque moments without the often harsh contrasts and complex continuities that occur in every city.



The potential effect of such photographic artifice became evident to me when I examined a CIS survey prepared for Georgetown, Texas. The survey happened to contain a highly rated photograph from my own city, Charlottesville, Virginia.¹⁰ By carefully excluding a large expanse of pavement and an immense hospital across the street, the image depicted a place very different than that I experience every day at lunchtime—a place free of busy traffic and car exhaust, the rumble of an elevated railway line, and the irregular urban fabric across the street.

This single example suggests the need to grasp more fully the power and responsibilities that accompany the use of photographic images. By analyzing images from the Milwaukee Visual Preference Survey through concepts of formal structuring, translation, meaning, and the relationship between caption and photograph, it is possible to see how a photograph projects a particular range of readings and conceptual content. In other words, although image-survey photographs seem to depict an unmediated “this is,” they are inevitably constructed to convey “this means.”

Cropping and Viewpoint

Cropping, the primary and perhaps most crucial formal manipulation used in the making of images, is often taken for granted by the viewer. In fact, the world that has not been included is essential to the construction of any photograph. Nevertheless, the carefully framed and formally simple street scenes used in the Milwaukee study appear unmediated and closed. For example, in the boulevard photograph shown above left, the planted median is tightly cropped to downplay its location in the middle of a busy six-lane arterial roadway.



Likewise, most VPS and CIS images are cropped in ways that present whole objects and places—and seemingly whole ideas. Like advertisements, they lull the viewer into abjuring critical consideration of complex physical, social and economic realities.

According to Stanley Cavell, “When a photograph is cropped, the rest of the world is cut *out*. The implied presence of the rest of the world, and its explicit rejection are as essential in the experience of a photograph as what it explicitly presents.”¹¹

The photographer’s use of point-of-view provides another formal tool to control meaning. According to theorist Victor Burgin, “It is the position of the point-of-view, occupied in fact by the camera, which is bestowed upon the spectator....[T]hrough the agency of the frame, the world is organized into a coherence which it actually lacks, into a parade of tableaux, a succession of decisive moments.”¹²

The most effective way of achieving this coherence, Burgin argued, is to center the camera/viewer within the frame; and many survey photographs use centered framing in precisely this manner. For example, by centrally locating the viewer in a place that can hardly be occupied, the boulevard photo projects a potential for inhabitation and tranquility quite apart from the reality of noise, fumes, and concern for physical safety.

Left: +7.2 Highest-rated image in the Visual Preference Survey.

Right: +6 Pedestrian realm with outdoor café.

Tension between Reality and Formality

Consider the credence given to a photograph, as opposed to a drawing of a place. A photograph offers evidence that a place seems certain to exist. But what is one intended to “see” or believe? André Bazin has claimed that “the objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture making.”¹³ Roland Barthes has gone one step further, arguing that a photograph is essentially fused with its referent, its principal statement being “that has been.”

Many contemporary artists have attempted to challenge this common belief in the denotative function of the photograph. For example, they may obscure indicators of time and place, usually structured to reinforce the authenticity of an image, to erode the sense of a specific reality.

Although the Milwaukee survey photographs are not formally constructed to disrupt the authenticity of the referent, locational clues are often obscured in order to focus the viewer on abstract qualities of place. Experience of the real place thus does not correspond with the photographic representation.

While posing as ordinary snapshots, other forms of dislocation may also be used. For example, depth perception may be reinforced, and the viewer may be drawn into photographic space through perspectival devices such as the regularly spaced, receding lampposts of the waterfront image shown here. Or else, homogenized formal elements may be used to dislocate the viewer, seducing him or her to project one city onto another, irrespective of specific production or evolution of place. Thus, red bricks and a handful of ubiquitous shops may appear to be easily transposed from Venice or Sacramento to Milwaukee—irrespective of climate, culture, or political economy.

It seems possible that physical environments could be more critically represented in public processes. Attempts have been made to use video and film to overcome some of these limitations. Current image-survey methods might also be improved by consistently pairing eye-level photographs with a plan or bird’s-eye view that clarifies connections between spaces.

But there is no substitute for the real thing. Taking resident groups on visits to real places within their community—places that are culturally and historically specific to them—is the only way to truly provide a multisensory experience.

This is not an unreasonable suggestion, since the actual number of survey respondents is usually manageable, and the process could involve a series of weekend walkabouts. Participants might be asked to take photographs during the walk to bring back for reference in discussions. In this

way, the photo as a referent to some larger whole might be more meaningful than a disembodied image, removed from its context. If the objective is to more fully engage residents in the design of *their* city, it is crucial that they have a deeper understanding of limitations and opportunities beyond the visual.

Acts of Translation

All photographs are made twice over—first configured by the photographer, and then more significantly reconfigured by the viewer. Even though neither of these acts can ever be “objective,” image surveys rarely acknowledge these acts of translation. Nelessen has summed up the VPS process as follows:

*The VPS™ provides the pictures/vision of what your community wants and what it does not want on its land. The images are not arbitrary; they are not unreasonable. They are a product of a public process. They represent public consensus from people who have experienced the place. They provide insight and reasoned responses. They represent a consensus vision. It is planning and design by democracy.*¹⁴

Widespread citizen engagement in planning processes is essential, yet one must ask whether these image surveys produce a meaningful public process, or set up a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While proponents of image-survey methodologies imply that photographs are value free, a majority of the 230 images shown in the Milwaukee survey displayed three dominant qualities: wealth, leisure and nostalgia. It was assumed that survey respondents would concentrate on the spatial and formal aspects of the places depicted. Yet, one photograph after another like that on p. 41, contains signifiers of prosperity, showing athletic white pedestrians ambling along brick streets lined with fashionable shops, cafes, and mock gas lamps.

The viewer clearly relates such photographs to personal experience, subjecting “this is” to individual interpretation and translation, thereby influencing his or her perception and survey ratings. The result is that survey participants evaluate the made-placeless photographs—casting votes for those that exhibit the most attractive trappings of contemporary consumer culture and constructed nostalgia.



Meaning

Can these survey images hold meaning? If so, to what degree of precision can this meaning be predicted? Numerous theorists have examined this question in terms of painting and photography. Perceptual psychologist and art theorist Rudolf Arnheim wrote that pictures “do not offer explicit formulations of intellectual concepts, which are the prerogatives of language.”¹⁵ He argued that we are affected by pictures, but do not know what they mean—insisting that images are poor conceptual communicators.

Victor Burgin has countered this position, insisting that “content, too, may be *produced* as deliberately as one may plan the formal composition of the photograph.”¹⁶ What is the meaning of the image shown above of the commercial entryway? Is it really that “Harley Davidson, a corporate American success story, should be more visible in Downtown,” as the survey authors concluded after the ranking was complete.¹⁷

Furthermore, differences in the cultural background of individual viewers cannot be discounted. Might an African-American, for example, not be expected to respond differently to such an image of largely white pedestrians in an upscale commercial district?

The serial presentation of the 230 images in the Milwaukee survey also creates a cumulative effect. As each photograph is projected for a few seconds, viewers are drawn into complicity with a set of values and meanings intentionally or unintentionally structured into the survey

sequence. Perhaps the survey process would be improved if participants could see all the images first to establish a context, then rank them at their own pace in a more thoughtful manner.

Text and Image

A photograph is polysemic—containing different meanings that are usually controlled by juxtaposition with the verbal text of a title or caption. Roland Barthes discussed the function of text in relation to image as either *relay* or *anchorage*. “In relay, the image and the linguistic text are in a relationship of complementarity: the linguistic message explains, develops, expands the significance of the image.”¹⁸ By contrast, text can also *anchor* one among several possible meanings, while clearly rejecting the others.¹⁹

The photographs in the Milwaukee Downtown Plan use captions to anchor the desired connotation. However, because the captions were not attached until after the survey, these may not be the same meanings participants had in mind. Did most viewers think, “Police must be visible...” as they rated the photograph of two horses carrying smiling uniformed men through a lovely park? Initially projected as straightforward snapshots of real urban places, the survey photographs from the Milwaukee Downtown Plan were only anchored by captions at the time of publication.

What are the alternatives? What if captions were included from the beginning? The survey’s creators already know what they want each image to “embody.” In relation to VPS, Nelessen’s book provides a long list of positive and negative planning and design features that can be extracted from the survey images. Moreover, what if the

Left: +4.4 Harley Davidson, a corporate American success story, should be more visible in Downtown.

Right: +5.8 Police must be visible....

images were accompanied by clear captions listing location, time, and other relevant information to anchor the image more specifically to place?

Representation and Identity

The pervasive influence of language is felt even without the presence of captions. According to Bazin, “Even the uncaptioned photograph, framed and isolated on a gallery wall, is invaded by language when it is looked at: in memory, in association, snatches of words and images continually intermingle and exchange one for the other; what significant elements the subject recognizes ‘in’ the photograph are inescapably supplemented from elsewhere.”²⁰

The idea that one brings individual experience to the photograph assists our understanding of the constitution of the human subject through representation. Representation creates identity, and we form ourselves—and our places—to be like images around us.

Those who represent the culture to itself thus have the power to create identity. Representations of architecture, landscape, and urban space within real estate promotion, advertising, and public planning processes have immense power to shape formal and spatial expectations or norms. Photography, film, television, digital media, and advertising teach us not only how to “see,” but how to construct our understanding of the city and our place in it. For this reason, those immersed in contemporary culture—both those who inhabit and those who design the built environment—would benefit from greater critical awareness of how to receive and construct photographic images.

Urban photographs are not simple depictions of real places, but images intentionally constructed by both maker and viewer. Urban image surveys are about what someone wants the city to “look” like—not what it *feels* like to be there, or how it works. Photography and simulated urban images are valuable but inadequate tools by themselves for understanding existing urban conditions, imagining better places, and implementing positive change in the city. A richer set of methods might support a more meaningful collaboration between designers and inhabitants, addressing complex urban realities outside the frame.

Notes

1. Andrew Saint, “Architecture as Image: How Can We Rein in this New Beast?” in Peter Rowe and William Saunders, eds., *Reflections on Architectural Practice in the Nineties* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996). Also see Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988).
2. Nelessen described the history of the Visual Preference Survey in *Visions for a New American Dream: Process, Principles and an Ordinance to Plan and Design Small*

Communities (Chicago: American Planning Association, 1994). Also see the A. Nelessen Associates, Inc., website at <http://www.nelessen.org>.

3. Nelessen, *Visions for a New American Dream*, p. 83.

4. See <http://www.lgc.org> for the Community Image Survey developed by the Center for Livable Communities.

5. This lineage can be traced to John Zeisel’s *Inquiry by Design: Tools for Environment-Behavior Research* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1981). More recently, while building on Kevin Lynch’s seminal work on mental maps, Jack Nasar has made connections to psychological theory and recent environmental behavior research. It is important, however, to distinguish between Lynch’s use of the word “image” as an experientially derived cognitive image, and the Community Image Survey’s use of the term to describe a photograph of an urban condition. See Jack L. Nasar, *The Evaluative Image of the City* (London: Sage Publications, 1998); and Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960).

6. Quote from the Center for Livable Communities website at <http://www.lgc.org>.

7. Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Meaning in Western Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980).

8. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (London: Academy Editions, 1996).

9. In a short essay accompanying the reissue of *The Eyes of the Skin*, Pallasmaa further developed his thoughts on vision. “A remarkable factor in the experience of enveloping spatiality, interiority, and hapticity is the deliberate suppression of sharp, focused vision. This issue has hardly entered the theoretical discourse of architecture, as architectural theorizing continues to be interested in focused vision, conscious intentionality, and perspectival representation.” Juhani Pallasmaa, “Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses,” *Architecture*, March 2006, pp. 28–29.

10. See <http://www.georgetown.org/pdfs/williams.drive.study.2005/Civic.Design.Presentation.12-8-05.pdf>. The image of Charlottesville’s “corner” district appears on page 8 ranked with a 5.3.

11. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 24.

12. Victor Burgin, “Photography, Fantasy, Function,” in *Thinking Photography* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 146.

13. André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 13.

14. Nelessen, *Visions for a New American Dream*, p. 97.

15. Rudolf Arnheim, “The Images of Pictures and Words,” *Word and Image*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Oct-Dec 1986), p. 310.

16. Victor Burgin, “Art, Commonsense and Photography,” *Camera/Work*, London, 1976, pp. 1–2.

17. Milwaukee Downtown Plan, p. 31.

18. Burgin, “Art, Commonsense and Photography,” p. 5.

19. Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1973).

20. Burgin, “Photography, Fantasy, Function,” p. 192.

All the images reproduced here were part of a Visual Preference Survey conducted between October 1997 and January 1998 and published on pages 18–35 of the Milwaukee Downtown Plan (1999). The entire document may be viewed online at <http://www.mkcded.org/downtownplan>. All photos courtesy of A. Nelessen Associates

Changing Places: The Bonnettstown Photographs of Andrew Bush

Evidence in photographs of time passing often evokes a sense of place. Such evidence is, of course, what is carefully removed from a building photographed to celebrate its design.

An additional sense of place has come from a custom that developed beginning in the 1930s, but that mostly took hold in the 1950s, of identifying not just in what year a picture was taken but where its subject was found. Before that photographers (like painters) tended to think that their art, not their subject, was the whole point. In titling a picture they might generalize and say what they thought its meaning to be—but not what its subject was and where they had found it (or where it might still be found).

Remarkable evidence of these changes was a book of photographs, from which the pictures reproduced here are out-takes, taken between 1978 and 1982, by one Andrew Bush,

an American in his mid-twenties with a masters degree in photography from Yale. The book, *Bonnettstown: A House in Ireland*, was published by Harry N. Abrams in 1989 and was soon remaindered.

Bonnettstown Hall was a house built in 1737. In it, when Bush photographed it, lived four elderly people who had earlier had varied careers in other parts of the world. The photographs showed the house and its rooms, including private rooms with the possessions of the tenants, and the rooms where food was prepared, with signs of its preparation. Interestingly, only one picture included one of the tenants, a retired Royal Navy Commander. Nevertheless, Bush's photographs showed time passing in the life of the house, in the lives of the tenants, in the seasons, even the household appliances. (The kitchen range was an AGA, a make celebrated in the 1930s by the British

Architectural Review, a range that was installed in Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water.)

One thing that impelled Bush to take the photographs was learning that the house had sold and would be renovated by new owners. In the pictures in the book there is no sign of the household's end; that is only mentioned in the book's preface. The final picture reproduced here is of parked vehicles outside the building seen out a window at the time of a final auction of some of the tenant's belongings.

—Cervin Robinson

1. Bonnettstown, Entrance Hallway.
2. Bonnettstown Hall, oblique view.
3. Drawing Room Fireplace.
4. Laurence's Bedroom.
5. Lower Kitchen.
6. Auction Day, view down avenue.



1



2





4



5





Battle for a Neighborhood

Stefan Hastrup



Following a crisis or natural disaster the life of a city may be suddenly changed. As the ordinary becomes, for a time, extraordinary, the usually slow, incremental process by which urban form takes shape may be disrupted, and brief, unusual opportunities arise.

As emergency funds open the possibility to implement long-dormant dreams, however, critical questions emerge. Can this fleeting moment be sustained long enough to create real change? Who will decide its character? And will the vision be compelling enough to create the political coalition needed to implement it?

The battle to remove the Central Freeway in San Francisco following the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake serves as an intriguing example of such a process of civic reinvention. It also provides an example of how a powerful design idea can help grassroots activism triumph over expediency.

Today, the consequences of the Central Freeway struggle continue to reverberate well beyond roadway design, to include issues of housing affordability, architectural design, and the nature of public space in the city.

San Francisco's Freeways

Like so many American metropolises, the San Francisco Bay Area was transformed in the 1950s and 60s by a wave of freeway building designed to speed cars through and past existing urban neighborhoods and out to the burgeoning suburbs. The Bay Area's first master plan for such a high-speed auto infrastructure was developed in 1948 by the California Department

Above: Axonometric view the potential build-out of the land formerly occupied by the Central Freeway. Drawing by Solomon E.T.C.

Opposite: The level of conflict in the struggle to replace the Central Freeway became clear in this piece of pro-freeway campaign literature.

of Highways. After several iterations, it came to include a web of elevated expressways that would surround and crisscross the City of San Francisco linking the Oakland Bay Bridge to the Golden Gate Bridge and the Peninsula to the south.

Strikingly, within the city, the plan called for a double-decked highway to run along the entire length of the downtown waterfront (known as the Embarcadero), crossing Market Street directly in front of the Ferry Building, its preautomotive gateway. Another such double-decked segment, which would become known as the Central Freeway, was planned to connect Highway 101 northward to the Civic Center, slicing through the city's South of Market, Hayes Valley, and Western Addition districts. From there, additional segments were planned to continue north to the Marina district and west through the Golden Gate Park Panhandle to a cloverleaf interchange with another major north-south route. Massive demolition through dense central neighborhoods would be required to realize the plan.

When construction of this roadway system began in the 1950s, many San Franciscans were appalled by the results. Clearly, the city they prized for its beauty would be unrecognizable if the plans were fully implemented. When protests greeted the opening of the first segment of the Embarcadero/Golden Gate Freeway in 1959, the city's governing Board of Supervisors voted to halt most remaining projects. And in the years that followed, led by activists like the late Sue Bierman in Haight Ashbury, many neighborhoods organized to oppose further attempts by the California Department of Highways to build extensions to existing freeway segments. In a final blow to the master

plan, the supervisors voted 6 to 5 in 1966 to stop an extension of the Central Freeway into Golden Gate Park.

These battles spared much of the city from freeway blight and created a new appreciation for its architectural heritage. But, in practical terms, they left fragments of a larger system, which dumped concentrated volumes of high-speed traffic onto city streets.

One Moment of Change

The epicenter of the 1989 earthquake lay deep beneath the Santa Cruz Mountains, but its destructive force was felt throughout the Bay Area, many miles to the north. The quake, the region's most severe since 1906, caused billions of dollars of damage, and hit its freeway infrastructure particularly hard. It collapsed the double-decked Cypress Structure in Oakland, killing 42 people, damaged the Oakland Bay Bridge, and forced closure of two significant freeways in San Francisco, the Embarcadero and the Central.

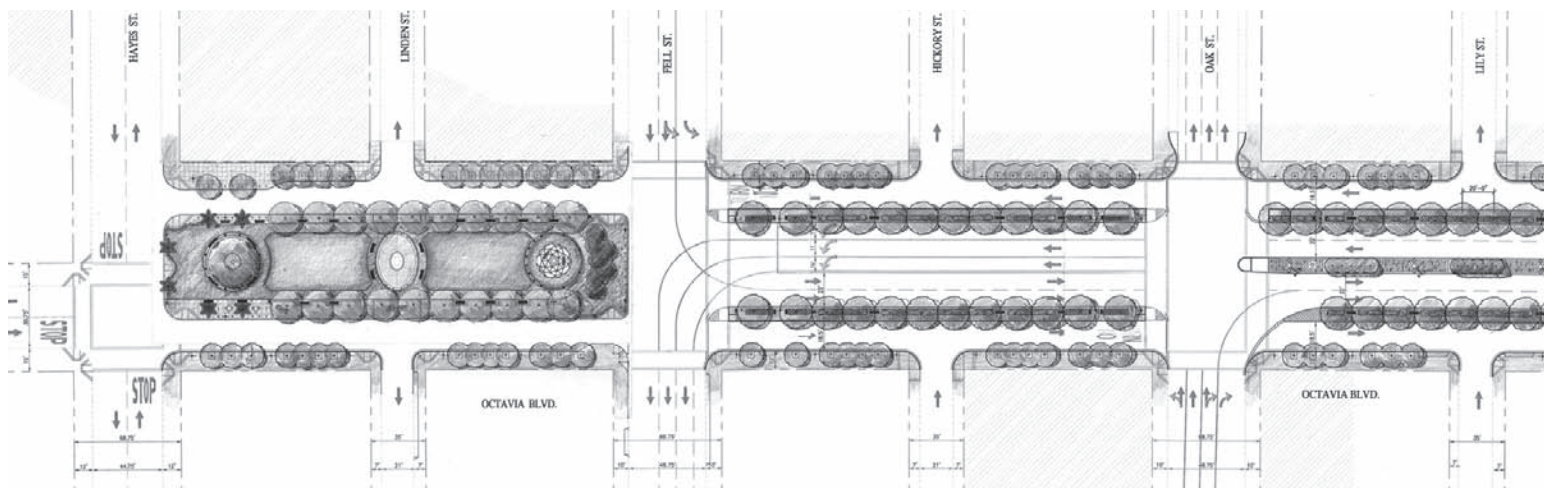
With many of San Francisco's other freeways in need of expensive retrofit and repair, the quake also rekindled hope that these vestiges of an ill-conceived transportation plan might finally be torn down. The challenge, however, was to develop a replacement plan that could recapture the space occupied by the Embarcadero and the Central Freeways to the benefit of the entire city, while offering viable transportation alternatives to those who had grown dependent upon them.

In the case of the Embarcadero Freeway the argument for demolition was relatively easy to make because engineering studies could offer no hope for an economical retrofit. Had the quake lasted a few seconds longer, seismologists even suggested it would have "pancaked" like its twin,



the Cypress Structure in Oakland. Because planners had explored removing the elevated structure at the waterfront for years, a great deal of support also existed for a ground-level boulevard that might integrate a light-rail line and allow reconnection of the downtown to its waterfront.

Of course, the final decision to tear down the Embarcadero Freeway was not without controversy. Many felt it was vital to the economic well-being of neighborhoods north of downtown, including Chinatown. Others, however, heralded the benefits of reclaiming the water's edge, and within five years they had prevailed. Today it is almost impossible to imagine the city without its redesigned Embarcadero.



By comparison, the effort to remove the damaged sections of the Central Freeway would prove far more difficult. Several factors contributed: the Central Freeway linked to arterial roadways that served large western and northern neighborhoods; the lower-income, and largely minority neighborhoods that surrounded the freeway did not have nearly as powerful a constituency as the downtown waterfront; and design alternatives had not previously been explored. Clearly, time would be needed to develop a workable solution that could address the transportation issues and repair the scar left in the fabric of the city if the freeway was removed.

Despite the importance of the situation, many of the city's elected officials proved unwilling to step forward to address it. Politically, the issue represented a no-win situation. At the time, San Francisco elected members of its Board of Supervisors at-large, rather than by district. Taking a strong position one way or the other on the Central Freeway issue would mean alienating a large block of voters. The fight to remove the freeway thus fell largely to neighborhood activists.

The Need for a Plan

The first effort to plan the future of the Central Freeway involved a series of public meetings led by Caltrans, formerly the California Department of Highways. These resulted in chaos, as the agency focused only on schemes to retrofit, widen, and rebuild all or portions of the roadway. Many residents of the surrounding Western Addition and Hayes Valley neighborhoods strongly opposed these concepts. But they splintered over an ever-expanding array of alternatives, and without direction from Caltrans, the process stalled while neighbors debated how much of the freeway should be demolished, how traffic should cross Market Street (via tunnel, recessed roadway, overpass or surface street), and how the project would be funded if a freeway were not part of the design.

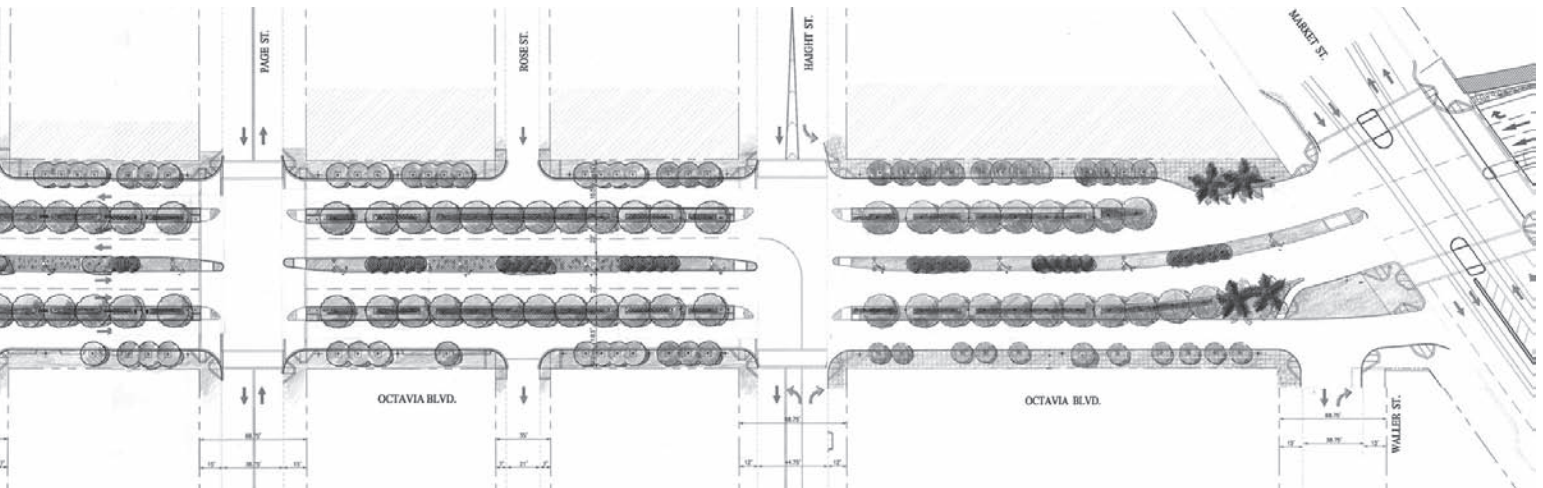
The apparent disarray and delay prompted activists in neighborhoods farther west, frustrated by disrupted traffic flow, to author a city ballot measure directing Caltrans to cease studying alternatives and rebuild the damaged freeway immediately. The measure was approved by voters in November of 1997.

Shocked by the vote, freeway foes

realized they needed to unite behind a compelling alternative. The solution was a design by Alan Jacobs and Elizabeth MacDonald for a European-style boulevard that could balance citywide travel needs with the needs of surrounding neighborhoods. The pair envisioned terminating the single-decked portion of the freeway at Market Street, from where a new Octavia Boulevard would extend four blocks north, ending at a new public "green" which would buffer the active retail area on Hayes Street from through-traffic.

Jacobs and MacDonald's boulevard design allowed higher-speed traffic to be accommodated in four center lanes, which would feed into the east-west arterial streets running through the area. Local, slower-moving traffic and bicycles would be accommodated on secondary neighborhood lanes with curbside parking. The two systems would be separated by landscaped medians that would provide pathways for pedestrians. The sidewalks in the plan were designed to be wide, protected from traffic, and they included various seating and landscaping amenities.

In general terms, the boulevard scheme was intended to disperse and diffuse the freeway traffic into the city



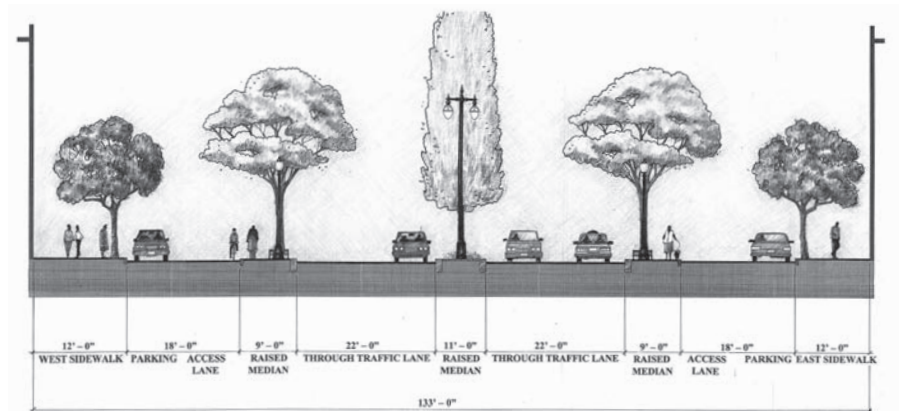
grid, while reclaiming a meaningful pedestrian realm. As Jacobs and MacDonald explained, it offered something for everyone, but no one interest group got everything.

More Propositions, Pro and Con

With this plan in hand, activists from the Hayes Valley neighborhood, backed by a citywide coalition, mounted a campaign to repeal the initiative to rebuild the freeway. They collected enough signatures to place a new measure, Proposition E, before voters, and raised enough money to finance a support campaign.

In response to these efforts, freeway supporters fought back. Dismissing the boulevard idea as a pipe dream, they attempted to discredit its backers by asking “What are they smoking?” Prop E supporters countered that “A 1950’s mistake can’t solve a 21st century problem.” And in November 1998, buoyed by endorsements from several members of the Board of Supervisors and one of the city’s main newspapers, the boulevard proposition passed by a comfortable margin.

The victory, however, was short lived. Just as boulevard proponents turned to an implementation strategy, word came that freeway advocates



had collected enough signatures to qualify yet another initiative. The new Proposition J called not only for repeal of the boulevard plan and the rebuilding of the freeway, but repeal of a 1992 Board of Supervisor’s ban on extending the freeway northward. The measure also required that any further changes would need approval by a two-thirds majority of the voters.

Boulevard proponents were deeply discouraged by the prospect of fighting another anti-freeway campaign. The futility of trying to conduct urban design via the ballot box was becoming clear, as only the most superficial aspects of the issue had ever reached voters through the media. A deficit remained from the previous Prop E

campaign, and there also was strong voter fatigue over the whole issue. However, boulevard proponents and Hayes Valley neighborhood activists led by Robin Levitt and the late Patricia Walkup rallied supporters by expanding the debate beyond the roadway issue.

Above: Octavia Boulevard. Drawing courtesy of the San Francisco Department of Public Works. Market is the diagonal cross-street at the right. Crossing Market (traveling left to right), traffic ascends to the remaining section of the freeway, which is not double decked, and which connects to I-80 east to the Bay Bridge and US 101 south to San Francisco Airport.

Below: Cross-section drawing of Octavia Boulevard. Drawing courtesy of the San Francisco Department of Public Works.



With the help of several city supervisors, they put a counter Proposition I on the ballot that would reaffirm the boulevard plan and enable portions of the land opened by freeway removal to be sold off for housing. Proceeds from the sale of former freeway right-of-way would be used to fund the design and construction of the boulevard, and any remaining monies would be used for transportation improvements along routes leading to or from it.

After three consecutive years of voting on the Central Freeway issue, San Franciscans finally had both alternatives before them. In the summer of 1999, a “No on J/Yes on I” campaign was launched by boulevard proponents—this time with a broader coalition, and television advertising. While freeway advocates called their proposed boulevard a “horse and buggy

transportation plan,” boulevard supporters claimed it would be “Cheaper, Faster, Better.”

An Expanded Civic Enterprise

The Central Freeway debate was finally settled on election day 1999. Passage of Prop I and defeat of Prop J meant the Jacobs/MacDonald boulevard plan could move forward. The first official step was the transfer of freeway lands north of Market Street from the state to the city.

During the first morning rush hour after the freeway was closed news helicopters circled overhead expecting a traffic Armageddon that never materialized. Then, before work officially began, Hayes Valley residents hosted a demolition party under the Market Street overpass. Politicians were given the chance to whack at the freeway

columns with a golden sledge hammer, and all now claimed to have been boulevard supporters from the beginning.

A further significant shift in public attitudes had also taken place. The last round of campaigning had forced grassroots advocates to expand their aspirations and confront a deeper set of questions. What kind of neighborhood would emerge if the freeway came down? What aspects of the surrounding area should be reinforced if the street grid were knitted back together? And at neighborhood meetings, which took place in tandem with the campaign, the idea had taken root that a better city could be envisioned collectively through planning, as local residents began to tackle such complex issues as optimal housing densities, the impact of parking, and the importance of pedestrian friendly-streets.

Such increased public awareness paid off as the boulevard project grew into a major urban-infill project. With the freeway gone, areas formerly adjacent to it needed to be rezoned, and major public and private investments were needed on former freeway lands. The San Francisco Planning Department responded by launching a master planning initiative for the entire Market/Octavia area.

After years of politics, residents were primed to engage in a real community process to address inter-related issues of neighborhood livability, housing affordability, density, architectural design, traffic planning, transit, and parking. The plan that emerged included reductions to parking requirements and changes in the way housing densities were calculated to encourage design flexibility and active ground-floor uses. It is unlikely the community would have supported these ideas without the experience and perspective gained during the boulevard fight.

Today, the sense that community advocacy can be leveraged to achieve good neighborhood design and planning has continued to evolve in new directions. Hayes Valley activist Robin Levitt convinced the Mayor's Office of Economic Development, the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, and several civic organizations to sponsor a competition to address the potential of parcels bordering the boulevard for new housing. Aimed at reclaiming the neighborhood through quality design and architectural innovation, the San Francisco Prize 2005 elicited more than 160 entries and introduced a host of challenging ideas.

In addition, the popular new green, now named for Patricia Walkup, has become the focus of an ongoing temporary art program. A temple installa-



tion by David Best was wildly popular, and additional projects are in the pipeline. Neighborhood efforts are also underway to redesign some of the alleyways intersecting the boulevard after the Dutch *woonerf* (which creates semipublic outdoor living spaces by blurring the boundaries between street and sidewalk).

A Moment to Savor

When Mayor Gavin Newsom cut the ribbon to open Octavia Boulevard on September 9, 2005, the presence of the Central Freeway in the area seemed a distant memory. The dark overpass at Market Street was gone; the tree-lined intersection at Octavia was filled with sunlight and people; and the new vistas south to Bernal Heights and north to St. Mary's Cathedral were startling.

But nagging questions remained.

Could it really have taken sixteen years to build four blocks of boulevard? Could more have been done to extend it south of Market Street? Would the surrounding neighborhood find ways to temper new pressures of gentrification?

Still, it was a moment to savor. The Loma Prieta earthquake had opened a window for San Franciscans to reassess past planning decisions and consider alternatives. And in Hayes Valley ordinary citizens had been inspired to create historic change by taking charge of the planning process.

Opposite: Octavia Boulevard. Photo by author.
Above: Historical aerial view of Central Freeway. Photo courtesy the San Francisco Department of Public Works.

Background into Foreground: Film as a Medium for Teaching Urban Design

Roy Strickland



After World War II, advances in film technology, especially increasingly small and mobile cameras, enabled filmmakers to break out of the studio lot and shoot on location, at first combining location and stage work, but eventually shooting films almost entirely in their actual settings. These settings were often cities, whose complex and dramatic environments provided natural locations for films emphasizing realistic plots and characters.¹ In the 1940s and 1950s Italian Neo-Realism and American Film Noir helped establish this on-location tradition, and it has been carried to the present by filmmakers such as Wim Wenders, Wayne Wang, and Spike Lee.

Given cities' important role in film and the medium's particularly vivid and kinetic depiction of cities, films provide a rich resource for the teaching of urban design. This article discusses ten films screened in the University of Michigan's Master of Urban Design Program's introductory studio for their lessons about the intersection between urban form and social life. After summarizing the reasons for using film in urban design studio, it describes the criteria used to select films, identifies some of their lessons (which are revealed through viewing exercises), and concludes with a reflection on the value of film in teaching urban design.

Film as Part of Urban Design Studio

Like most American urban design programs, Michigan's provides a brief, intensive, post-professional course of study. Studios are central to the two-and-one-half-term curriculum, and are accompanied by courses in history, theory and practice. During the program's first studio, films with urban settings are screened on an almost weekly basis as part of a discussion section.

There are compelling reasons for showing films in studio, especially as students begin urban design. Their narratives help introduce the complex intersection of urban form and social life that designers should address as they shape the environment; their cameras capture the city from metropolitan to architectural scales, the realm within which urban designers practice; and, for students who come from all over the world, they are a means of fostering a common, global experience with cities without leaving the studio.²

To extract lessons from the films in the Michigan course, students are given exercises that focus on interpreting their locations, followed up with group discussions. Some of these exercises are described here, including drawing plans, sections and elevations of a film's settings; or assuming the identity of a character and describing his or her relation to the surrounding urban environment.

The Films

The films selected from the Michigan filmography for this article were all produced between 1949 and 2005. They represent a variety of genres (drama, thriller, romantic comedy, docudrama, etc.), but are consistently effective in their depiction of cities and the manners in which people inhabit them. As are all the films shown in urban design studio, they were selected for four reasons: they were shot primarily, if not entirely on location³; they portray people actively engaged in claiming and using urban space; they show not only urban exteriors and interiors but also interstitial spaces such as lobbies, halls and stairways; and they were filmed in a variety of cities around the world.

In order of their release, the films are *The Naked City* (1949, New York City; Jules Dassin director); *The Third Man* (1949, Vienna; Carol Reed); *Battle of Algiers* (1966, Algiers; Gillo Pontecorvo); *Wings of Desire* (1987, Berlin; Wim Wenders); *Salaam Bombay* (1988, Bombay; Mira Nair); *Do the Right Thing* (1989, Brooklyn; Spike Lee); *Love Jones* (1997, Chicago; Theodore Witcher); *Chinese Box* (1999, Hong Kong; Wayne Wang); *Beijing Bicycle* (2001, Beijing; Wang Xiaoshuai); and *Crash* (2005, Los Angeles; Michael Haggis).

Streets, Blocks and Buildings: *The Naked City*

Urban films often open with “establishing” shots that characterize their locations. For the films discussed here, these include footage of New York’s skyline; Vienna’s church spires; the port, Casbah, and European settlement of Algiers; Los Angeles’ freeways; and Berlin’s rooftops. Usually taken from the air, these shots capture general patterns in city form—streets, blocks and buildings—that will be revealed in greater detail as their narratives unfold.

The Naked City, an early example of American on-location shooting, opens with New York as seen from a plane, as the sound of the propellers mixes with a narrator’s voice-over to help establish the film’s self-professed realism. Delivering on its promise, the film then provides a scrupulous portrait of the city that illustrates the relationships among streets, blocks and buildings that are fundamental to urbanism.

Tracing the manhunt for a young Manhattan woman’s killer, the film culminates in a shootout on the towers of the Williamsburg Bridge, high above the East River. Beforehand, however, as detectives crisscross the city, they interact with a cross-section of New Yorkers—from laborers to socialites—occupying nineteenth-century Lower East Side tenements, early-twentieth-century Park Avenue apartment houses, and 1930s midtown office skyscrapers.



As shown in the film, New York’s street and block system, seen first from the air, encompasses a wide range of buildings, activities and social groups, creating distinct neighborhoods. These nevertheless cohere into a larger urban whole because of a prevailing urbanism of 200-by-800-foot blocks, party-wall building construction, and consistent density.

Viewing exercise: Sketch the streets where *The Naked City*’s characters (the murder victim, the young detective, the primary suspect) live or work, and be prepared to compare and contrast the building types, uses, and landscape elements along these streets.

Lesson: An urban street and block diagram as abstract and two-dimensional as a grid can achieve richness and nuance with time and use.

Curbs, Sidewalks and Steps: *Do the Right Thing*

Do the Right Thing puts the street and block under a microscope to reveal the multiple thresholds and spatial claims that support their inhabitation.

The film follows Brooklyn residents and shop owners at work and play on a block of row houses and tenements during a hot summer weekend. The block’s every stoop, windowsill, shop awning, parked car, tree bed, and garden fence are shown to demarcate the spatial domains of varying age and ethnic groups. Teenagers lounge on fire escapes; children dart between cars and open fire hydrants; elders lean against windowsills and garden fences; and

Opposite: *Crash*. Car as private space within public domain of the street.

© Lionsgate Entertainment

Above: *Do the Right Thing*. Claiming space on a city block’s stoops and fire escapes.

© Universal Cities Studios, Inc.

shopkeepers vigilantly watch their front sidewalks. Ultimately, this tenuous social equilibrium, composed of visible—and invisible—thresholds between the block's occupants, is broken by underlying social antagonisms, and the film culminates when intergenerational and racial tensions explode in a riot.

Reinforcing *The Naked City*'s lesson about a "simple" street system's potential for richness, *Do the Right Thing* portrays the manners in which hierarchies of public and private space, laid upon its street system through architecture, landscape and human activity, can give a city an extremely fine grain.

Viewing exercise: Draw a plan of the street in *Do the Right Thing*, including buildings, spatial demarcations, and landscape elements, and list all the activities occurring on the street and their locations.

Lesson: Multiple spatial definitions, social claims, and human activities can occur within the limitations of urban dimensions.

Windows: *The Third Man*

Walls and windows frame the streets in *The Naked City* and *Do the Right Thing*. In both films, windows give glimpses of rooms, shops and people behind the walls—just as from interiors they afford views of streets and passersby. As the films show, public and private life in cities may be separated by no more than a street wall, allowing windows to express both separation and linkage.

In *The Third Man*, a thriller set in immediate post-World War II Vienna, street-wall windows play a prominent part in the narrative. The film follows Allied occupational authorities as they pursue a notorious racketeer through the city's medieval center and nineteenth-century Ringstrasse. By speaking with or observing people through windows, the film's characters make tactical decisions about the chase, setting in motion plot twists that eventually lead to the racketeer's capture.

Viewing exercise: Draw a section through buildings to either side of a street in *The Third Man*, with particular attention to walls and windows overlooking the street, and note people's use of windows in the film's narrative.

Lesson: Street-wall windows bridge immediately adjacent private and public spaces and enable people to occupy both realms simultaneously, a subtle and sometimes precarious condition of urban life.



Above: *The Third Man*. The urban window facilitating simultaneous occupancy of public (exterior) and private (interior) space. © Canal + Image U.K. Ltd. and the Criterion Collection.

Halls, Lobbies and Courts: *Battle of Algiers*

Cameras in urban films cross skylines, streets, and windowsills. They also move up and down stairs, hover over lobbies, and glide through halls to show how interstices in the city's spatial hierarchy are rich and interesting places in their own right. In these spaces, the sounds of apartment life extend beyond closed doors to lay domestic claim to stair landings (*Naked City*); children play on steps to bring street activities into buildings (*Do the Right Thing*); and people cross paths in building lobbies as if in a small public square (*Third Man*). Ambiguously public and private, interstices are shown to contribute complexity to both the city's spatial diagram and the experience of urban life.

Perhaps no film makes this point more clearly than the docudrama *Battle of Algiers*, a reenactment of the Algerian revolution. As guerrillas and French paratroopers race back and forth between the Casbah in the hills and European settlement below, the courtyards of the indigenous North African houses provide shelter for family and community life amidst escalating violence. In Algiers, the courtyard is the setting for cooking, childrearing, and family celebrations (and, as the film duly notes, the clandestine meetings of insurgents).

Viewing exercise: Draw plans or sections of a courtyard house as shown in *Battle of Algiers* and identify and locate the different activities it contains.

Lesson: Interstices can play as intricate and powerful a part in urban life as the dwelling, street or square.

Opposite: *Battle of Algiers*. Interstice as ritual space: courtyard during wedding prayers. © Casbah Films, Inc. and the Criterion Collection.



Street Furniture: *Salaam Bombay*

In the Casbah and the Lower East Side, shops push display tables into the streets. In Brooklyn, a grocery spreads vegetable stands under awnings. In Vienna, a café extends tables and chairs into a square. As films shot in these locations illustrate, street furniture may extend a commercial or social claim on public space and become woven into urban life. In the films, it provides a setting for meetings (*Third Man*), cultural exchange and confrontation (*Do the Right Thing*), information gathering (*Naked City*), and political action (*Battle of Algiers*)—all in addition to its service function.

In *Salaam Bombay* the role of street furniture in urban life is even more pronounced. The story involves a boy abandoned in the Indian countryside, and portrays his struggle to develop a livelihood and constitute a surrogate family from among the peddlers, prostitutes, and street children of Bombay's slums.

In the tenement blocks that are the film's primary setting, canopies, tarps, sheets and blankets hang from building walls and balconies to provide shade for the carts, bins and tables of vendors selling everything from refreshments to electronics. Rolled out or back as needed, fabric and furniture may fundamentally alter the dimensions, use and image of the

street according to the time of day or weather.

Viewing exercise: Draw an elevation of a tenement block in *Salaam Bombay* and show types, locations and uses of accompanying street furniture.

Lesson: As much as buildings, streets and sidewalks, street furniture can help determine the shape, character and use of urban space.

Sounds: *Chinese Box*

In *The Naked City*, *Do the Right Thing*, *The Third Man*, and *Battle of Algiers*, the sounds of the street—voices, footsteps, traffic—interject themselves on interiors. As the films suggest, ambient noises are integral to urban life, as made strikingly clear in *Chinese Box*.

Set in 1997 as Hong Kong is transferred from English to Chinese rule, the film captures the noise of cars, planes, boats, fireworks, sirens, chimes, whistles, crying babies, etc. that intrude on or recede from people's debates about politics, economics and personal relationships. In the soundtrack, the recurring crash of a construction-site pile driver provides a metaphorical heartbeat for the film's two major characters: a dying English journalist and the dynamic city where he has made his home.

In Hong Kong, *Chinese Box* demonstrates, conversa-



tions and personal reflections are set within a *mélange* of sounds traveling down the alleys, up the balconies, and through the casement windows of the city's dense, yet permeable urban fabric.

Viewing exercise: Assume the character of the English journalist in *Chinese Box*, list the sounds he hears, and identify their relationships to his activities and states of mind.

Lesson: Because of their prevalence in cities, sounds are inseparable from people's relationship to urbanism.

Cars: *Crash*

As urban films show, cars contribute greatly to a city's activity, congestion and noise. By creating contrasts between heavily and less trafficked streets (French-inspired boulevards and indigenous pedestrian passages in Algiers; eight-lane arterials and market alleys in Hong Kong; north-south avenues and east-west side streets in Manhattan) moving cars help give texture and variety by differentiating urban spaces and neighborhoods one from the next. Meanwhile, at rest, they become street furniture. In *Do the Right Thing*, for example, parked cars separate street from sidewalk and take their place alongside shop awnings, display racks, and lawn chairs as social and commercial claims on public space.

Los Angeles is, of course, the most car-oriented of cities, and the car's role in urban space and social life is at the center of *Crash*. After establishing shots of streaming

Above: *Salaam Bombay*. Urban space as shaped by street furniture. © Channel Four Television Company Limited, Cadrage S.A., National Film Development Corporation, Ltd. and Mirabai Films, Inc.

Below: *Chinese Box*. The city carved from sound. © WW Productions, Inc., Le Studio Canal + NDF International Ltd.



head- and taillights on nighttime freeways, the film tracks hitherto unrelated Angelinos—a pair of young criminals, a district attorney and his wife, a doctor and her father, the owner of a convenience store, a television producer and his wife, several policeman, and a locksmith and his family—as they cross paths following a car-jacking and give vent to ethnic and racial antagonisms.

For the people in *Crash*, cars serve as a private space for sexual relations within the public space of the street; provide class and race signifiers in a socially and racially stratified city; and offer safe space within a threatening urban environment.

Viewing exercise: Describe the ways in which cars are used by characters in *Crash*; identify the kinds of cars shown in the film and what they signify to their drivers and to others.

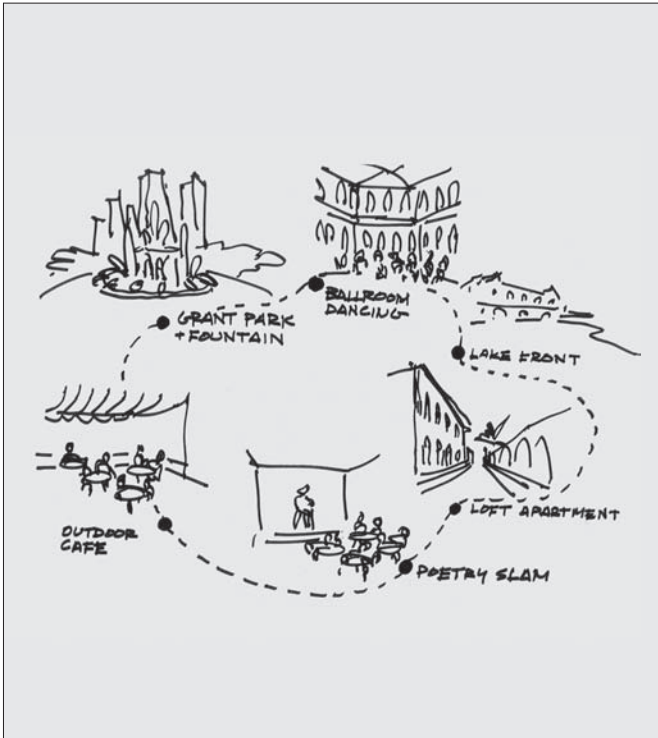
Lesson: Cars are not merely transportation, but play social, aesthetic, and spatial-ordering roles in cities.

Edges and Gaps: *Beijing Bicycle*

Films often use urban edges and gaps, from empty lots to riverfronts, in their narratives. At the end of *Crash*, a socially repressed television producer who has finally acted on his frustrations stops at an empty shoulder of road to join in the free play of a group of boys surrounding an abandoned, burning car. In *The Naked City*, the parents of the young murder victim reflect on her life as they sit at the river's edge. In *Do the Right Thing* three men set up lawn chairs along the blank sidewall of a building at a street corner to observe and comment on their neighbors. In these films, urban edges and gaps enable characters to withdraw to spaces outside the purview and interference of others to play, reflect, and engage in benign and/or illicit activities.

For the adolescents in *Beijing Bicycle* such spaces afford the opportunity to organize their own society. The film follows an ongoing fight between a messenger boy and a high-school student after each claims possession of a bicycle that has been stolen from the first and sold to the second. As they chase each other across the city on bicycle and foot, they cross a network of spaces claimed by adolescents, such as rail sidings, construction sites, highway underpasses, and river edges. These are risky environments

Above: *Beijing Bicycle*. Urban gap of railroad tracks as adolescent free space.
© Arc Light Films



that adults avoid, freeing them to be claimed by teenagers, who use them to socialize, fight, bargain and dispense justice.

Viewing exercise: List the places where adolescents congregate in *Beijing Bicycle* and note the ways they are used.

Lesson: Urban gaps and edges that may be outwardly peripheral and neutral are potentially central to the experience of the city for people who use them according to need and invest them with importance.

Maps: *Love Jones*

By claiming and connecting their city's edges and gaps, the teenagers in *Beijing Bicycle* create their own map of the city. Since this map reflects the needs and activities of their particular social group, it may be imperceptible to outsiders.

Differentiation between maps is a common theme in urban films. The murderer in *The Naked City* thinks New York "beautiful" because it contains so many places unknown to the police, where he can hide. The racketeer

in *The Third Man* uses the underground world of Vienna's sewers to evade authorities. In *Battle of Algiers*, contrasts between the narrow, twisting passages of the Casbah and the broad avenues of the French quarter give the revolutionaries an initial advantage: the colonists' map of Paris-like streets is easy to read, while the routes of the insurgents resist discovery by the authorities.

In *Love Jones*, a romantic comedy set in Chicago, a coterie of friends and acquaintances, all in their twenties and thirties, inhabit poetry clubs, outdoor cafes, record shops, photo studios, and residential lofts where they engage in discussions of art, love, politics and sex. Against the backdrop of the city's skyline, they occupy an alternative environment carved from Chicago's former industrial landscape, where bleak, even intimidating, streets and buildings offer warm and vibrant interiors, rich in color, music and conversation. Among sophisticated people like these, it is possible to construct a map of parties, cultural experiences, and taste choices tied together by taxi and motorcycle trips. Their world exists in stark contrast to that occupied by one group-member's photographic subjects: poor and working-class people isolated on the city's South Side.

Viewing exercise: Draw a map of the activities of the friends in *Love Jones*, noting the kinds of buildings and streets that contain them and the means of traveling between them.

Lesson: Individuals and affinity groups construct their own, nonofficial maps of cities, the layering of which contributes to urban complexity and meaning.

Thought and Memory: *Wings of Desire*

In the film *Wings of Desire* angels hover over Berlin. With the power to read people's minds, they reveal the city as a crisscrossing of streams of consciousness. From this vantage, they see Berliners going about their daily lives, speaking to themselves about politics, family, mortality and desire, and creating private emotional spaces for reflection, often stimulated by the streets, buildings and landmarks around them.

These reflections move back and forth in time—the cosmopolitan Berlin before World War II; the city under wartime bombardment; the present-day city, etc.—and mix with real space and time to pose the city as an existential concept as well as physical place. As if speaking for cities, one of the film's characters, a young trapeze artist, concludes, "I have a story and I'll go on having one."

Viewing exercise: Assume the characters of the angel, the trapeze artist, and the elderly man in *Wings of Desire* and describe each one's relation to Berlin.

Lesson: The city is both a physical and emotional construct.

Above: *Love Jones*. Sketch of one social group's map of Chicago, derived from film viewing exercise.

Opposite: *Wings of Desire*. The city in memory. © Road Movies Film Production GMBH and Argos Films, Paris.



The Power of Narrative

As shown by these examples, films shot in urban locations are valuable to the teaching of urban design. For students, they provide an international survey of cities that enables both comparison and contrast of urban form and social life and identification of continuities across the globe. They depict cities from the metropolitan to the building scales, clarifying the relationships among the constituent parts of urbanism. And, with their cameras' depth of field, they capture the city's multiple streams of activity, the forms and spaces containing them, and their hierarchy—all of which are subject to urban design.

Also, to paraphrase the trapeze artist in *Wings of Desire*, films render the city as a story. That story consists of people claiming, occupying and mapping urban form and space. In return, urban complexity enables people to construct highly personalized relationships with their environment that foster intimacy, social exchange, introspection and conflict. All these things make the city alternately dramatic, comedic, romantic and tragic. In cities, where exterior and interior, public and private, may be separated by little more than a wall or window, minor variations in form, down to the curb, sidewalk or step, can exert powerful influences on people's behavior, providing a rich vein for exploration in

urban design—a lesson clearly expressed in films.

Finally, for students of urban design, films suggest the importance of narrative in developing projects. As urban-location films make use of the city's plentiful and often subtle forms and spaces, designers may use narrative to help evolve urban environments. In particular, film may urge them to ask the all-important question: Is this design complex, rich and subtle enough to support multiple narratives constructed by me, by others, and by time?

Notes

1. For example, see commentary by Alain Silver and James Ursini for *Panic in the Streets*, DVD, Fox Film Noir Series, 2006.
2. Usually more than half of Michigan's urban design students come from outside the United States.
3. Thus, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, despite its verisimilitude to New York's Greenwich Village, is not screened because it was filmed entirely on a Hollywood sound stage. Meanwhile, Carrol Reed's *Third Man*, mixing some English studio footage with a preponderance of film shot in Vienna, is shown.

New Ruralism: Agriculture at the Metropolitan Edge

David Moffat

As the New Urbanism has gained prominence, other initiatives have surfaced recently claiming to embody its correlate—the New Ruralism. Predictably perhaps, these have sought to use New Urbanism’s new profile in the popular imagination as a flint to strike new enthusiasms and a touchstone to derive their own ready-made sense of authority.

However, as a workshop at the University of California made clear earlier this year, there is much to question in these claims—in particular, the extent to which these initiatives really complement the core values of New Urbanism.

Some visions of New Ruralism do indeed reinforce New Urbanism’s goal of concentrating new development around transit-served town centers and encouraging reinvestment in older urban cores. But others seem more concerned with trading on New Urbanism’s nostalgic association with “traditional” small-town values to promote a supersized suburbanism with potentially devastating environmental consequences.

Convergence of Interests

The workshop in April was sponsored by SAGE (Sustainable Agriculture Education) and IURD (the Institute of Urban and Regional Development) at UC Berkeley’s College of Environmental Design (CED). Funded by a grant from the Columbia Foundation, it was part of a larger effort to bring together practitioners and researchers engaged in urban-rural interface issues. Its goal was to begin to draft a framework of principles, policies and practices to preserve rural environments and ensure that rural lands (especially those near cities) remain viable locations for farming.

At issue is “the preservation and

enhancement of urban-edge rural areas as places that are indispensable to the economic, environmental and cultural vitality of cities and metropolitan regions,” according to Sibella Kraus, President of SAGE and New Ruralism Project Director for IURD.

In a “A Call for New Ruralism” in the Spring 2006 issue of *Frame-works*, the CED alumni journal, she described how rural areas, especially those near cities, are at tremendous risk from “suburbanization, environmental degradation, and an industrialized and globalized farm economy.” Yet, at the same time, urban residents are “increasingly overfed and undernourished...disconnected from rural and natural surroundings that further recede with increasing low-density auto-dependent urbanization.”

“In many ways industrialized agriculture and urban sprawl are similar blights, both operating with little regard to the natural conditions of the landscape and oblivious to the ecological and cultural uniqueness of place.”

To counter such forces, the New Ruralism framework proposes a cooperative effort between the New Urbanism, Sustainable Agriculture, and Farmland Preservation movements. Its eventual goal is to establish permanent agriculture preserves as sources of fresh food for urban regions, and as places to nurture connections with the land, preserve rural life, and contain and sustain cities.

In opening the workshop, CED Dean Harrison Fraker hailed the effort as the beginning of a “conversation” on a number of themes previously seen as unrelated—healthy food, smart growth, and farmland preservation. The roster of attendees mirrored these concerns. It included Ann Evans, former Mayor of Davis, California (now co-chair of the Roots of Change Council); Michael Dimock,

President of the Ag Innovations Network; Ed Thompson, Director of the California Office of the American Farmland Trust; Shelly Poticha, President/CEO of Reconnecting America and the Center for Transit-Oriented Development; and Prof. Richard Jackson of the UC Berkeley School of Public Health. Representatives of the Greenbelt Alliance, the Trust for Public Land, the Bay Area Open Space Council, and other related organizations also attended—as did planners, designers, researchers, and city officials involved in farmland preservation issues.

A New Ruralism framework such as envisioned by those in attendance might have far-reaching implications for areas such as California’s Central Valley. Productive farmlands there are being plowed under for development at an alarming rate. At the same time, IURD and others are studying how the state can best accommodate its next 15 million residents. Furthermore, Fraker pointed out, 50 percent of the world’s built environment will be produced in the next fifty years. On a global scale, choices about whether to preserve or develop rural lands will be critical to the health of the planet.

Competing Visions

There could hardly be more difference between this view of what New Ruralism means than that promoted by other groups in the last several years. At the other end of the New Ruralism spectrum lies the dream of extending the fully serviced private residential enclave over an ever more dispersed “exurban” geography.

The idea of “country living” on hobby farms or ranchettes has been around for years, popularized by the retreats of movie stars, presidents, and corporate bigwigs. But it is now being promoted for the common



man by publications such as *Progressive Farmer*, which have little to do with raising crops, and everything to do with selling rural real estate and outfitting people with the products, services and attitudes to occupy it. With features about escaping the dangers of the urban environment, such publications tap into a deep and abiding American phobia of both the physical milieu and potentially corrupting qualities of cities. Yet, instead of a wholesome life on a working family farm, the new paradigm entails complete mobility by private car, full access to modern communications, and

Above: New development encroaches on productive agricultural lands at the city's edge. Central Valley, California. Photo courtesy of SAGE.

an unfettered free-range consumerism.

The link between this vision and the name “New Ruralism” received a boost last year from a publicity campaign by the St. Joe Company. This New York Stock Exchange-traded real estate development company is presently selling off of vast (and previously unproductive) landholdings in northern Florida as retirement properties for aging baby boomers. And in June 2005 it published a promotional “white paper” outlining the activities people might engage in there and the supposed philosophical connection between these and rural values. In particular, the paper stressed how the company’s portfolio of RiverCamps, WhiteFence Farms, and Florida Ranches (complete with “Cracker-modern” architecture)

would foster rediscovery of “an intimate connection with the land.”

Yet, despite opening the discussion with Henry David Thoreau’s well-known words from *Walden* about going to the woods to “live deliberately” and “front only the essential facts of life,” there is nothing humble about this New Ruralist vision. According to the white paper: “Larger home sites, often separated by nature preserves or agricultural land, offer a buffer from your neighbors. These are places where the front porch is a place to scan the vastness of your domain.”

As Roberta Fennessy wrote last year in *Urban*, Columbia University’s Urban Planning Magazine, there is also little that is rural about such a vision. It is really about bringing all the private comforts of the city to



the country and leaving the public responsibilities behind. In this rural landscape, every bedroom has its own bath, county roads are never manure covered, farmers don't have bad teeth, and intimate contact with nature is complemented by full access to premium entertainment services.

Apart from fencing off and domesticating wild habitat, and requiring continuous applications of chemicals to control the weeds and bugs, building and servicing this new rural utopia will require a vast new infrastructure. Not the least of this will be miles of new and improved roads needed to transport all the new ruralists to the usual outposts of American culture at the local Interstate highway interchange.

Public vs. Private Value

It is perhaps fitting testament to the versatility of the New Urbanism that its arguments can be spun in such opposite directions. However, the core difference between this New Ruralist vision and that presented at the UC workshop involves competing views of public vs. private environmental values. Specifically, the St. Joe vision is suspicious of engagement with any kind of public realm. Meanwhile, it is precisely the public value of rural lands that the UC workshop set out to explore.

As stressed by many presenters at the April event, the continued existence of productive agricultural land at the metropolitan edge ensures the continued existence of urban and rural life as interrelated poles of experience.

To this way of thinking, farmers are not only producers of food, but conservators of a valuable heritage. Instead of suburban fantasies of rural life, the vision of the metropolitan edge emerging from the workshop was of small- to medium-scale sustainable agriculture, overlapping with areas for wildlife and habitat management.

Protecting farmlands, however, requires protecting farmers, and as Ann Evans told the workshop, this means rediscovering the basis for a viable local farm economy. This is not as far-fetched as it may seem, she said; indeed, it represents a "new mainstream." The key is to develop

Above: Rural heritage often combines agricultural, landscape, and habitat values. Photo courtesy of SAGE.

new market incentives that promote a direct-to-grower mentality that will encourage a new generation of urban-edge farmers to develop high standards of stewardship, pride of place, and meaningful opportunities for workers.

According to Michael Dimock, this model has great promise. In the past, it has been difficult to convince farmers to make common cause with environmentalists, health advocates, and good-government groups. But, as a roundtable effort in Ventura County near Los Angeles indicates, they have much to gain financially from such allegiances.

Concern for farmland preservation dovetailed with the second important theme at the workshop—how U.S. food policy deliberately distances people from any understanding of what they eat. As a result, instead of being fresh, healthy and flavorful, the nation's food supply has become as tasteless as new development is placeless.

According to Richard Jackson, such lack of dietary awareness has also created a public health crisis. Specifically, the rise in obesity and Type Two diabetes can be directly related to the average 63 pounds of high-fructose corn syrup a typical American consumes each year, largely in soft drinks and processed foods.

Nevertheless, Ed Thompson pointed out, the great majority of federal farm subsidies go directly to the commodities that underlie the “fast food” culture that makes Americans fat. Meanwhile, support for growers of “slow foods” such as fresh fruits and vegetables is negligible.

Shelly Poticha pointed out that similar fallacies govern people's choices to move ever further from transit-served, walkable communities. They think they will save money and live a better life by doing so, but actually become victims of a commuter “rat race.”

Carrots and Sticks

Much of the policy discussion at the workshop focused on ways to harden the rural edge against sprawl encroachment and so allow it reflect development pressure back to existing bypassed areas. The fact is, farmers today often count on selling their lands to developers as a form of retirement insurance, Dimock said.

A variety of carrots and sticks were discussed as ways to preserve farming at the urban edge. Among the carrots, the most important involve raising the value of farm output. This can mean switching to higher-value organic crops and making direct partnerships with urban consumers through farmer's markets or purchase agreements with restaurants.

With the rise of new communication technologies, dual-income farm families are increasingly common. Another way of creating value is to brand fresh farm output through a system of protected “appellations.” A more revolutionary approach might mean paying farmers for public services they already provide, such as carbon sequestration, ground-water recharge, and habitat management.

The sticks discussed were really a range of public-policy interventions. According to Thompson, one of the most successful New Ruralist initiatives is in Montgomery County, Maryland. There, a hard-and-fast line has been drawn between rural and urban areas, and property owners on the urban side can increase the density of developments by buying conservation easements from farmers on the rural side.

In California, farmland preservation easements have not been as successful, said Prof. Elizabeth Deakin of UC Berkeley's Department of City and Regional Planning. Two problems have surfaced: the easements

create an unproductive patchwork, not an edge; and they have not been instituted proactively to protect the most valuable and productive lands. Eventually, some biological analysis will have to be incorporated into the program if it is to be successful, Dimock suggested.

Another way to add value to agricultural lands has been to allow clustered residential development. Student researchers presented a number of such projects at the workshop. Some, following the New England Qroe Farms concept, even allow residents to purchase a stake in the farm operations.

Such projects have, however, been criticized for producing a “kindler, gentler” sprawl. They also may result in “farm parks” that largely ignore issues of social equity.

Telling the Story

Since the meeting took place in a university setting, one of its major outcomes was a tentative agenda for future research. This involves several tiers, focusing on physical, financial and legal structures. For example, one research goal is to better understand the legal and financial issues of clustered housing models.

However, as planner Steve Hammond of WRT Solomon E.T.C. pointed out, it is equally important simply to tell the story of the lifestyle, recreation and habitat benefits of a new relationship between city and country.

Above all, “New Ruralism is not just the absence of urbanism,” he said.

For more information on the New Ruralism initiative and framework visit www.sagecenter.org

The Transect

John Lund Kriken

I was pleased to read the “transect” discussion in the spring edition of *Places*, and was moved to consider its positive and negative aspects to the practice of urban design. I found the piece interesting but very different from our experience in the SOM-San Francisco urban design studio in both international and North American contexts.

In their theme article for the issue, Charles Bohl and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk write:

Generally, the theory is represented graphically through a simplified typology of “transect zones.” The transect most widely used by New Urbanists divides the human environment into six such zones, from very rural, to sub-urban, to urban.... What distinguishes the physical character of each of these “immersive” settings is the manner in which everything—e.g., building types, heights and setbacks; open spaces; the character of streets, alleys and passages; the design of street lighting, landscaping, trees, and street furniture—reinforces a certain overall physical character of place.

This wish to define a desired physical character for each transect zone implies that cities are static and specific like architecture. Our experience is quite different: city form is constantly changing. Specifically, cities grow through resident births and immigration, and they decline following job loss and out-migration.

We would agree that compatibility among physical elements is important, but compatibility should not mean replication. Instead, it should establish the limits of a range of visual tolerances that are nondisruptive to the visual character of a particular place.

Most importantly, our responsibility as designers and planners should be to make all cities anticipate and be adaptable to population change. Rather than focusing on specific prescriptions for physical compatibility, a more necessary and useful response is to develop tools to manage and guide population change to higher levels of sustainability and livability.

The theme article also presents the transect concept as a tool to help define a regional framework for planning by encompassing “a more complete range of human settlement types, addressing relationships between urban, suburban and rural areas, and attempting to define the basic physical characteristics that differentiate them.” In our experience, this is not the principal regional planning problem. Across much of the world, the regional problem is not how settlement looks, but where it locates. The planning tools that are really needed are ones that help protect valuable, irreplaceable land, promote air and water quality, and conserve energy.

Today and in the future, all development forces conspire to make cities look the same. To minimize risk, developers copy existing, successful projects. The same technology and building materials are used worldwide. In the interest of simplifying building conditions, mountains are leveled, valleys are filled, and waterways are channelized. Language and culture are in similar distress, and eventually all cities may end up looking and feeling alike.

To counter such forces of homogenization, it seems a positive framework for settlement and development should use every means possible to encourage the unique identity of particular places. But this purpose seems at odds with a transect concept which

seeks to regulate physical character. This is not to argue against the use of regulation, but to suggest that the quest for compatibility should not be the logical beginning point when imagining future cities or rebuilding existing ones.

In his article “Counterpoint: Transect Transgressions,” Jaime Correa observes “in traditional urbanism, there is no such thing as a natural law; incremental development, with its eccentricities, appropriateness, and morphological disobediences is ‘The Law.’” This observation is largely consistent with our own position as urban design consultants.

As we have studied cities worldwide, we have come to realize that the most memorable reflect their unique natural features, climate, culture, and built environments. Their character may, or may not, be related to the descending scale of density from urban to rural that defines the transect concept. For example, the built environment of Hong Kong is beautifully framed by mountains and water. But buildings are located on so small a land area that the minimum residential building height is 40 floors. Only 23 single-family homes remain in a city of 8 million people.

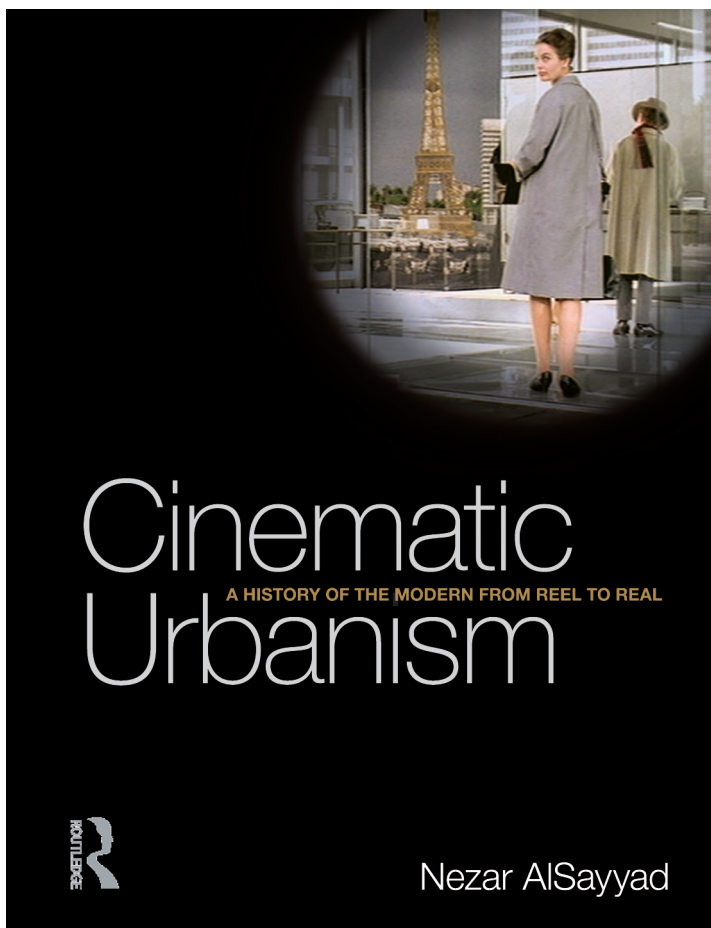
In San Francisco local conditions lead to a different outcome. Tall buildings are located on hilltops and ridgelines to promote views and to avoid blocking the views of others. Downtown San Francisco is conceived as a manmade hill, and the skyline itself is a matter of public policy and design. It is a cold city, and access to the sun in public parks is protected, tree-created shadow is not always desired, and the wind is buffered where possible.

These conditions contrast markedly with those in Isfahan, Iran, a desert city centered on a mag-

nificent 1,500-by-450-foot plaza, or “Maydan,” surrounded by 40-foot-high walls. This open space is enormous, and the height of the surrounding buildings is unusually low; but together they create a place for cool nighttime strolling, away from walls that re-radiate the day’s heat. Like these few examples, all memorable cities derive their uniqueness from some combination of the expressions of culture, climate, and natural and manmade features.

We have high regard for the success of the New Urbanism in creating new models for suburbia that are both denser and more livable than the norm. The transect concept is proposed to further this effort through additional rules and regulations for its multiple districts in order to distinguish between them. However, we find this focus frustrating because for many years, our best urban design talent has focused on making better suburbs. This has been helpful, but

from our point of view, it also emphasizes the continued taking of rural land to serve population growth. What is missing in our schools and practices are new visions for creating a highly desirable, much-higher-density, inner-city neighborhood. We need more choices.



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John Cary and
Zachary Heineman

Public Architecture: ScrapHouse

PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE

These Forum pages were produced under agreement between the Design History Foundation and Public Architecture.

Public Architecture acts as a catalyst for public discourse through education, advocacy, and the design of public spaces and amenities. It undertakes public-interest design projects and coordinates a national program called the “1% Solution,” challenging architecture professionals to allocate a percentage of their billable hours to pro-bono or public-interest work. Based on a 40-hour workweek, 1 percent represents a modest 20 hours per year per person. If all 240,000 architecture professionals in the U.S. were to contribute, the collective resources would be the equivalent of a 2,500-person firm (the largest in the world) working full time for the public good, totaling an estimated 5 million hours of work annually. Visit www.publicarchitecture.org for more information.

John Cary is the Executive Director of Public Architecture. He serves as a board member, advisor, or consultant to more than a dozen nonprofit organizations nationwide. He speaks and writes extensively on issues affecting young architects, public-interest design, and the future of the profession. **Zachary Heineman** has divided his time between journalism, politics and architecture, and served as a project coordinator for ScrapHouse. He is presently pursuing his Master of Architecture and Master of Business Administration from Yale University.



In the spring of 2005 our small nonprofit received a call from San Francisco’s chief building inspector asking for help building a demonstration house out of—well, garbage. What started as an invitation simply to be involved with the project quickly evolved into us taking a lead role.

For four days that June, the city would play host to World Environment Day, and the organizers were determined to offer the installation as the visual and thematic centerpiece of an otherwise intangible event. Our challenge was to design and build a demonstration house on Civic Center Plaza—immediately across the street from San Francisco City Hall—in just six weeks.

Thus was born the Public Architecture project now known as “ScrapHouse.”

Above and next page: ScrapHouse was assembled entirely from recycled materials in only six weeks. Photos courtesy of Public Architecture. © 2005 Cesar Rubio Photography.

Design and Construction

We began our involvement by assembling a team of architects, landscape architects, lighting specialists, and metal fabricators, each of whom agreed in advance to volunteer their time, energy and ideas. When asked later to describe the work environment, team leader John Peterson, founder of Public Architecture, noted: “It was more like Iron Chef...except there were ten chefs making one meal, and the secret ingredient was yesterday’s leftovers.”

To complicate matters, concern immediately surfaced that our project might not meet our audience’s definition of “scrap.” Approximately two hundred mayors from around the world would be participating in World Environment Day. We feared our effort might simply emphasize the wastefulness of life in the United States. In response, we decided to highlight how ordinary things could be reused to create an artful new approach to dwelling. As one tagline for ScrapHouse



read, “from waste, luxury” (instead of “from luxury, waste”).

As the design took shape, our volunteers scoured Bay Area dumps, salvage yards, and manufacturing and construction sites, looking for usable materials. The design team, which was both proactive and reactive in the collection process, gave new life to these materials.

Built off-site in eleven distinct panels, ScrapHouse was brought to Civic Center Plaza on a flatbed truck. The panels had to be no wider than 14 feet, the maximum allowable width for transport on city streets. Four steel window openings, welded on-site from columns salvaged from the Port of San Francisco, were erected—along with the wall panels—using a large crane. As a temporary installation, ScrapHouse was not allowed a permanent foundation; instead, it was built on a plywood platform, laid directly over the lawn.

Despite its temporary and experimental nature, ScrapHouse had all the

elements of a typical American home: a kitchen, a bathroom, two bedrooms, and a living room. Its L-shaped layout, with 980 sq.ft. of ground floor and a 180-sq.ft. mezzanine, created an open and flexible space that was simultaneously dramatic and comfortable. Retired fire hoses from the San Francisco Fire Department covered the bedroom walls; phonebooks served as insulation and created a bookshelf unit in the main space. Solid-core doors recovered from a school-improvement project were used as a floor material, their window and doorknob openings filled with quick-set concrete. Insulated glass units, left over from a large condo project in San Francisco, were arranged in a shingle configuration to let in an abundance of natural light

Going Public

ScrapHouse opened its doors June 1, 2005, six chaotic weeks after its design had begun. Over the course of four days, it received more than 10,000 visitors—from schoolchildren

to octogenarians, from the homeless to owners of multi-million-dollar homes. Judging from media coverage and the individual comments we received, ScrapHouse impelled a broad cross-section of people to think about the possibilities of building with salvaged material. It has already provided inspiration for a significant salvage component in a 25,000-sq.ft. community center to be built near Seattle.

ScrapHouse was a clear departure from Public Architecture’s typical project type and approach, and we would almost certainly never do it again—at least not under the same schedule and budget. But for all its challenges, it offered many important lessons about building outside the traditional practice of architecture. ScrapHouse also brought people together—design professionals, builders, city officials, and lay people alike—in ways we never could have imagined or choreographed.

Today, ScrapHouse lives on in print, film, and on the Web, and continues to attract inquiries from around the globe. A documentary about the project by Emmy Award-winning filmmaker, Anna Fitch (one of the initiators of the project), was shown on the National Geographic Channel in September.

Had there been more time, the project’s impact could have gone deeper—providing a more permanent contribution to the canon of green building, for instance. But in retrospect, the greatest value of ScrapHouse was that it created broad excitement around an issue typically mired in narrow practical and technical concerns. ScrapHouse also illustrated the value of truly public architecture.