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Title
What is Urban? [Research and Debate]

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1fv8r9sd

Journal
Places, 15(2)

ISSN
0731-0455

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Publication Date
2003-01-15

Peer reviewed

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What Is Urban?

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Much attention has been paid recently to the need to create and foster urban qualities in new development. As part of this newfound concern, a variety of New Urbanists, Old-Urbanists, and Post-Urbanists have made repeated accusations and proclamations that certain areas are truly urban, others do not quite reach this threshold, and still others are simply posturing as such. Throughout the debate, little thought has been given to how the urban can be defined. As a result, what is actually built is frequently disappointing.

This article attempts to step back and synthesize a broader definition of the urban environment. It does so not by prescribing thresholds or milestones, but by identifying critical dimensions of the urban experience. The intent is to better shape the lenses through which we critique, admire and create urban environments.

Interaction, Not Form

Most people recognize urban environments intuitively. Shown an image of downtown Tokyo or Chicago, we immediately sense the urban qualities of those cities. At the same time, concrete definition of what makes it urban frequently evades words.

Often, architects or urban designers will define the urban condition by its physical attributes. Attempting to tread on familiar ground, they suppose that form is what is important. This, however, is not the case. New York City empty of people would be no more urban than the Piazza del Popolo transplanted to suburbia. Urban is a social condition first.

In sociological terms, it is the concentration of potential and forced interactions that makes a place urban. Potential interactions are those that are sought after, but which only become possible within an agglomeration of people. Examples might include finding a group of like-minded people who collect Nigerian dolls, or who enjoy and study architecture and urbanism.

Forced interactions, by contrast, are encounters that may not be directly sought, but arise anyway. In general terms, these may be thought to range from positive to negative. A positive encounter might involve a chance meeting with a friend on the street; a truly negative one might involve being robbed.

Most interactions in the urban environment float somewhere between these examples. Nevertheless, they are rich in the sense of the unexpected that we expect from an urban setting. Seeing a Hasidic Jew, passing a homeless person, smelling unusual food, helping a blind woman find a seat: these are the types of interactions that expand the experience of the city. Clearly, they cannot be as readily obtained in a more tightly defined village setting, or in the country. To be in an urban setting is to partake in, and surrender to, such interactions.

In an urban setting, such interactions also need not be direct. Interactions with the signs of other people's presence also play an important role. Passing graffiti, finding a newspaper on a seat, or imagining the impending rush of commuters through an empty train station are all moments that help create the urban condition. An urban space continually tells hidden stories of other people's beliefs, actions, attitudes and histories.

In light of these thoughts, the following sections identify five critical dimensions of the urban. Individually, each is a necessary but not sufficient condition for an urban environment. They should also be understood as ranges, not thresholds. The five dimensions are density, public space, variation, memory, and "the stranger."

Density

In simple terms, density is the number of people or the amount of activity that exists in a defined area. It is through density that the chance of an encounter is heightened and the range of qualities these encounters represent is expanded. Density is the most frequently cited dimension of urbanity. This may partly be because it is easy to quantify. But density also enhances other dimensions of the urban.

Density is not as easy to gauge as one might expect. The United States Census defines as "urban" any area having a density of more than 1,000 people per square mile.[1] Converted to acres, this represents only 1.56 people per acre. And if divided by typical dwelling-unit size, a settlement with just more than one half a dwelling unit per acre would be considered urban. Most would argue this hardly creates the conditions for a large number of forced and potential interactions.

A larger issue, however, is the difficulty of defining a threshold density for the creation of urban conditions. Such an evaluation may vary by culture, region, climate, and historic period. Numbers alone clearly cannot tell the story.

A better measure might involve juxtaposing numerical measures of absolute density with an understanding of how people live in a given area. A prison filled with inmates in solitary confinement might be extremely dense, but it would not be in the least bit urban. It is important to remember that density is critical only in so much as it affects interaction.

Public Space

While the public nature of space in an urban setting is often taken for granted, its role is crucial. Although density sets up the potential for interaction, it is in public space that this potential normally plays itself out. It is in public space that almost all forced interactions occur, and where many potential interactions take place as well. Public space may take many forms: a park, a street, a lobby, or even a store.

In his book *Great Streets*, Allan Jacobs writes at length of the importance of public space — and specifically streets — to the urban condition. In his view, streets are what allow people to interact with each other and with the past. They are the gateway to the urban experience. Jacobs writes that "maybe a particular street unlocks memories or offers expectations of something pleasant to be seen or the possibility of meeting someone, known or new; the possibility of an encounter."[2] He goes on to say that "communication remains a major purpose of streets," and that streets are "places of social encounter and exchange."[3] Certainly, without the public realm, density is mute and interaction is impossible.

In a sense, it is exactly the public character of space that is taken away in today's cities by the automobile (a mobile private space). When a street is dominated by automobiles, it is no longer a space in which interaction can happen; it is reduced to a conduit for private movement. Widespread automobile use may rob even a moderately dense area of the interactions needed to establish urban conditions.

Variation

As stated by Leonard Reissman in *The Urban Process*, "the city is a place of contrasts, an environment of extremes."[4] Variation adds a sense of richness to potential and forced interactions. Variation can take a number of different forms. It can be physical (color, size, type, location); social (age, race, religion, income, lifestyle); or related to use and activity. In whatever form it occurs, variation is a key differentiator between the urban condition and the more homogeneously defined communities of villages or towns.

In an essay "Urbanism as a Way of Life," Louis Wirth once stated that the city "has not only tolerated but rewarded individual differences. It has brought together people from the ends of the earth *because* they are different and thus useful to one another, rather than because they are homogeneous and like-minded."[5]

In the urban condition, individuals are not held to a common system of beliefs or mode of action. Instead, differences are allowed to blossom. Without the constraint of a single mode of thought, there is a greater acceptance of divergence, a greater degree of experimentation, and an expanded sense of freedom. In an urban condition, variety is not seen as alien or as a challenge to stability, but is often a sought-after goal.

The stranger is omnipresent in the urban condition, both unknown and different. Photo by author (Aix en Provence, France).

Memory

Memory is the legibility of layered actions over time. The urban condition involves a compilation of stories — some catalogued in the physical environment, others carried in collective thought, most manifest quietly in an individual's mind. Like variation, memory adds richness to the urban experience. Specifically, interaction with the past adds depth to the urban condition. As lives play themselves out, and as a continuing stream of individual decisions is inscribed in the built fabric, history becomes manifest in form. The city becomes a retainer of memory, a cacophony of individual and shared stories spoken out of time, simultaneously.

The absence of such layering of memory is why areas developed quickly and completely often initially lack a sense of urbanity. Thus, new towns may be designed with many formal urban qualities, but until they take on a patina of time and a layering of stories, they seem sterile. Imaginary interaction within them is limited to the present. There is little sense of the past — or of an imagined future.

To nurture an urban environment is to accept, and even instigate, uncertainty. It is to allow unforeseen actions to take their course, either grinding against or extending the existing environment, always marking what is there while inviting change.

The Stranger

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs wrote, "Great cities are not like towns, only larger. They are not like suburbs, only denser. They differ from towns and suburbs in basic ways, and one of these is that cities are by definition, full of strangers."[6]

The role of the stranger represents two relationships: the stranger as something that is not known, and the stranger as something that is different. As something not known, the stranger is the experience of seeing or interacting with people, things, or situations that are new. This can be as simple as walking down a busy street or visiting an area one has not explored before.

The sense of the stranger as different, however, implies the presence of people, things, or situations that may not only be unknown, but may differ fundamentally from yourself or the context around you. The urban dimension of variety is fully engaged here. Such encounters may range from seeing a homeless person, to passing a leather-clad punk, to hearing the distant chant of a Hare Krishna. This dimension adds to the excitement, surprise, and risk of potential interactions in an urban setting.

In a Fall 2001 article in *Places*, Michael Brill wrote that it is precisely the presence of the stranger that differentiates "Community Life" from "Public Life."[7] According to Brill, Community Life encompasses interactions with people with whom one is familiar. Public Life, its markedly different cousin, encompasses interactions with people one may not know at all. While this distinction may seem insignificant at first, it has substantial ramifications.

Brill claims the existence of Community Life without (or in lieu of) Public Life creates environments in which the growth of individuals and cultures suffer. Years ago, Louis Wirth suggested the lack of Public Life creates village-like environments where much of the energy, surprise, risk — and arguably, freedom — of urban environments is lost.

This is not to deny the importance of Community Life; village environments have much to offer. But they are substantially different from urban environments. And the presence of "the stranger," in both its forms, is critical to creating the social conditions that foster the urban.

Urban as an Analytical Tool

The above five dimensions of the urban can be used to analyze and better understand existing developments. And they can be particularly helpful in guiding the transformation of these places into more urban environments — if this is a desired goal. By understanding the five dimensions, designers may be better able to see what is missing, and possibly what cannot be added by design alone. The dimensions can also be used as guides in the creation of new urban environments.

The following examples of this type of analysis primarily concern developments located on the periphery of large cities. They have been selected specifically because the transformation of these areas has been central to much of the newfound interest in the urban condition.

Levittown

Levittown, the early poster child of suburban development, is interesting to investigate because over the years it has acquired a more urban character. Levittown initially lacked density, viable public space, and (of course) the stranger. But what was originally constructed as a sea of identical salt-box single-family houses has now been largely transformed, as individual owners have added new floors and wings, changed finishes, and altered windows. Countless moments, decisions, and memories are now cemented into the fabric of the area, as houses have been modified, sidewalks marked, and the landscape altered. Time has given a physical richness and depth to this development that could not have been imagined at its conception.

In addition, changes to individual houses have differentially altered their value. Houses originally sold for more or less equal amounts now vary widely in price. This, along with changes to the housing stock itself (i.e., in the number of bedrooms/bathrooms/amenities) has expanded the variety of lifestyles that may be accommodated in the area.

Because such changes occurred only slowly at first, Levittown was described for years as repetitive and sterile. But today it provides a layered and interesting fabric which houses an increasingly diverse population. A similar fate may await much suburban development in the U.S. Local spatial interaction may still be minimal, but interaction with the past has begun to register, and variety has bloomed where standardization was once the norm. Eventually, a more fully urban environment may emerge.

Opposite left: The plaza, the park, and the street are the mediums through which interaction can happen. It is the stage upon which density has the opportunity to transform the urban condition (San Jose, Calif.).

Opposite right: Eccentricity is the norm in the urban condition, with the stranger manifest in a variety of forms (Portland, Oregon).

Above: Levittown, New York. The original prototype cottage is at the top left. Over the years homeowners have modified the basic form to create a mixed housing stock that caters to different lifestyles, stages in the life cycle, and incomes. Variety and memory are now manifest in what began as standardization.

All photos by author.

New Urbanism

As its name implies, New Urbanism promotes itself as an alternative to current patterns of suburban development. Indeed, it has created communities which are much denser and have more viable public space than much development in this country since World War II.

Admittedly, New Urbanism has grown from a singular idea to a large and diverse movement. Today, there are many versions and variations of New Urbanism, and each incorporates ideas of the urban differently. One of the primary branches of New Urbanism involves development of entirely new communities on the peripheries of major cities. But even although these developments are often denser than their suburban neighbors, they still limit or lack some of the fundamental dimensions that create the urban experience.

If the urban is truly a goal of New Urbanism, contradictions internal to such developments would seem to be impeding its realization. Specifically, an emphasis on Community Life instead of Public Life and certain aspects of their underlying economic framework are limiting the development of the five dimensions that define the urban condition. For example, many New Urbanist communities lack variety and time, and embody an extremely sanitized approach to the stranger. This is not to say they lack merit. Instead, it suggests they might better be considered products of a New Village movement, since they encompass a very different sociology than the urban condition.

Brill's article masterfully described some of the ways New Urbanism has almost unknowingly championed Community Life over Public Life. Although New Urbanism refers repeatedly to "urban" qualities, much of this discourse surrounds meeting neighbors, knowing local shopkeepers, visiting the village green, and creating a close-knit community. Some of the most noted New Urbanist developments — including Seaside, Kentlands, and Laguna West — thrive on the ideas of community, familiarity, and shared values. Intrinsic to this view, however, is the elimination of the stranger, both as someone not known and as someone different. Public Life is thus "normalized," and a potentially urban environment becomes more like a village environment.

Their underlying economic framework is often one reason the stranger, along with other dimensions of the urban, is left out of such communities. Many are structured around a "master developer" who plans the community, structures its financing, acquires the property, and phases its construction. In this master-developer approach, uncertainty directly increases financial risk. Likewise, to promote a diversity of lifestyles or values would be to invite confrontations among residents. And to allow certain areas to remain indeterminate would be to raise questions about the nature of the investment.

Since New Urbanist developments are usually conceived as finished wholes, memory and time also have little room here (although Levittown may teach us something about this in the long run). And while variety is sacrificed to an agreeable rate of return, the stranger is left out in favor of a more homogeneous and predictable population. Of course, such qualities are not necessarily at odds with the desires of the New Urbanist target market. Nevertheless they simply diminish the urban quality of such communities.

The Mall

Potentially the most urban area in suburbia today is the shopping mall. If there is interaction or some semblance of urbanity anywhere in suburbia, it is here. In her essay "The World in a Shopping Mall," Margaret Crawford described the mall as the agora of twentieth-century America — a hub of activity where consumption is the primary driving force.[8]

But even if the mall is a strong example of density and public space, it lacks other key dimensions of the urban. In fact, malls provide a very strange form of urban

Left: New Urbanist developments thrive on the idea of familiarity (Seaside, Florida).

Opposite left: The urban condition allows and fosters a variety of choices for any given taste, From lifestyle, to menu, to apparel, all can be found and much is accepted (Buenos Aires, Argentina).

Opposite Right: Malls may provide a new version of urbanism for our time. They offer the thickest concentration of activity and interaction outside of central cities, bringing some aspect of urbanity to the suburbs (Mall of America, Bloomington, Minnesota).

All photos by author.

environment. At the mall, people temporarily forfeit the disconnected quality of the automobile, but their activities are monitored, some people are excluded, and the environment is specifically created to manipulate them. The stranger as someone unknown may be allowed, but only a very narrow sense of the stranger as someone different is present. Control is omnipresent, and precisely because of that control, there is little variation.

In addition, a continual fascination with the new and its ability to promote spending frees the shopping mall from any sense of time. The time of day, time of year, or time in history all give way to cyclical and constantly changing shopping events. Valentine's Day gives way to Easter, followed by Memorial Day — which leads to the Fourth of July, Labor Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and finally Christmas. Each event is wheeled in as a complete experience, set up, and taken down to make room for the next shopping experience. The mall may allow and promote interaction, but it limits its breadth and depth.

Creating the Urban

No longer seen simply as containers for marginalized lives, urban environments have a new place in the public imagination today. Such renewed attention has often come in reaction to the isolating qualities of developments at the perimeters of our cities. We have started to acknowledge the many positive aspects of the urban condition and attempted to re-create them. In doing so, however, romanticized views have sometimes clouded clear understanding of the urban environment, resulting in sanitized, uninspiring imitations. To understand why these experiments fall short, it is critical to see the core components of the urban. Only then may we understand how to properly foster, develop, and create urban environments.

This article defines the urban as first a sociological, not a formal condition. Forced and potential interactions are the most important aspect of a truly urban area. And, as described above, density, public space, variety, memory, and "the stranger" are the dimensions that are necessary to create it.

This article does not attempt to define thresholds for these dimensions; it does not attempt to prescribe any set density or degree of variation. Instead, by simply defining the dimensions of the urban, it aims to improve both the critique and the creation of urban areas. The definition of urban and its dimensions can help guide the transformation or creation of areas which have an urban condition as their goal. It can help point to what should be modified, what needs to be added, and, just as critically, what might be left to change on its own.

Notes

1. United States Census Bureau, Geography Division, Geographic Areas Branch, *Urban and Rural Definitions*, March 20, 2002. Available at http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua_2k.html.

2. Allan Jacobs, *Great Streets* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 4.

3. Ibid., 2.

4. Leonard Reissman, *The Urban Process: Cities in Industrial Societies* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 4.

5. Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology*, 1938, 69.

6. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 30.

7. Michael Brill, "Problems With Mistaking Community Life for Public Life," *Places*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Fall 2001), 48.

8. Margaret Crawford, "The World in a Shopping Mall," in Michael Sorkin (ed.), *Variations on a Theme Park* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992).