

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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sectors). This had major consequences for the people involved in these activities — neither their housing nor their economic needs were fully addressed.

How can we make legible — through built forms and spaces — the connections between these various parts of the economy?

We must do more than replicate the older visual forms that now characterize the immigrant city; we can be experimental and aesthetically adventurous. We must go beyond the image of the corporate city and at the same time avoid falling back on romantic notions of what a nice little Third World house would look like.

## Facing the Challenge of the American City

*David P. Handlin*

When I hear the word *city* used in conversations such as this, I try to imagine the kind of place its usage implies. And I invariably conclude that what is being referred to are places like the Lower East Side, Greenwich Village, parts of San Francisco or Boston, or Harvard Square, where my architecture office is located. In other words, the Jane Jacobs city, remnants of the pre- or early-industrial city, the walking city.

I have great fondness for these places, but there is one fundamental problem in thinking of them as archetypical of what a city should be: In spatial terms, they comprise probably less than one percent of the American city.

Recently I have had the opportunity to spend some time in three newer cities, Memphis, Houston and Tampa. Although each has an older section that dates back to the latter part of the nineteenth century, the bulk of these cities has absolutely nothing to do with Greenwich Village and Harvard Square.

My question, therefore, is if we cannot speak of the “city” in more encompass-

ing terms, are we simply writing off this other 99 percent and all the people who live there, bearing in mind that they are not simply the rich and privileged but represent the whole economic and ethnic spectrum?

Just as I question this narrow concept of what type of built form constitutes a livable or tolerable city, I see an equally limited idea of what constitutes urban public space. On the one hand our idea of public space is exemplified in our ongoing admiration for places like the *Place des Vosges*, and on the other hand, in various landscape traditions extending from the English garden to Frederick Law Olmsted. If these traditions continue to dominate our ideas about public space, we will continue to misunderstand or ignore the varied needs of the bulk of people inhabiting American cities.

I see two possible reactions to the emerging spatial constellation that I am describing. One is to turn one’s back on it, to withdraw into a nostalgia about what life supposedly was like in a city, town or suburb that existed in some

**It would be very difficult to prove that people who live in the ‘other’ city are less friendly or more isolated than people who live in cities like New York.**

— *David P. Handlin*

sort of golden age of the past. The other is to analyze this emerging context with the hope that as designers and theoreticians we might be able to shape it (perhaps, in part, on the basis of our knowledge of the history of city, town and suburb) in a more palatable way.

I am not as disdainful about following the first course of action as I might seem, because I know there are profound problems in following the second. One of the most important has to do with language. We simply do not have the words or phrases to describe or converse about, in part or in whole, this emerging city (if that is the right term). We seem to be trapped by our language.

Taking photographs in Tampa, I found myself trying to frame compositions according to conventions established by photographers of the urban scene. I was reminded of this recently when I saw some Berenice Abbott photographs. They are wonderful images but I have found that the conventions on which they are based do not seem to be useful in describing this emerging city.

What is needed is the artistic imagination both to create and represent this emerging city. Before that, there has to be a certain amount of faith or will. I can guarantee you that simply disparaging it is not going to make it go away. Amazing things, many of

them amazingly bad, are happening in every part of the American city — in the central cores, in the abandoned areas where the nineteenth century industrial infrastructure was located and on the far periphery.

Designers and theoreticians, especially in the last 20 years, have had virtually nothing of consequence to say about how these inevitable and inexorable waves of change should and can take place. By focusing on a narrow idea of what is desirable, we have rendered ourselves all but impotent.

## Architecture as a Universal Language

*Marshall Berman*

Within a number of different occupations, my generation — the '60s or New Left generation — practiced a form of what planners came to call advocacy planning. Planners lent themselves to the community movement, assuming not only that it was possible to determine what “the people” wanted, but also that one could think in terms of the interests and welfare of “the people” as a whole. Then, during the '70s and '80s, what we had thought of as “the people” disintegrated into an infinite number of distinct interest groups.

In a recent *New York Times Magazine* article, “The Secession of the Successful,” Robert Reich wrote that today, when people talk about their community, they use the '60s rhetoric of community control and power to the people, and that to a great extent language that originally expressed a challenge to traditional political systems has now been incorporated into practical politics. But today, Reich notes, “community” almost

**Is placelessness  
a problem, and  
if so, what sort?**

— *Marshall Berman*