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1. Layering



Creating layers is one of the simplest, yet most effective, strategies for expanding the information that a design can hold. Layers and overlapping in walls and spaces, like the layering of windows on a computer screen, allow us to dwell on the consideration of one level of information without losing track of a larger pattern or set of connections.

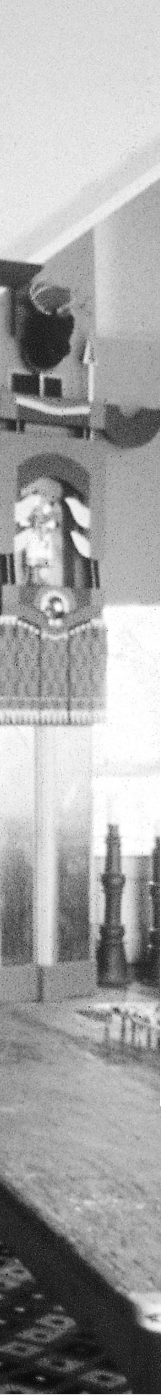
Walls with niches and projecting shelves can hold layers of objects and figures that elaborate the visual context, prompting associations that carry the mind through diverse areas of time and space (and allowing for change in the selection of those objects and their suggestions). Architects also often conceive spaces by layering differing kinds of decisions: the flowing complicated space of a room may be layered with the precise, reassuring measurements of a visible rhythmic structure in the walls or roof. This is profoundly effective in the vaults and walls of Gothic cathedrals, for instance, where ribs, recesses and aisles trace illuminating patterns through thickets of stone, allowing the mind to both grasp and explore the complexities of the space. The layers of inscribed regular measurement in classically ordered rooms also serve well to construct apparent order within the shifting circumstances of use.

Modest dwellings have no less need to be both lucid and suggestive, if they are to serve us well. Places that allow movement between successive layers of building and landscape provide for an outgoing rich with choice and possibilities for experience. Openings, porches, columns and fenced yards build up layered zones that can accommodate diverse activities (watching, snoozing, leaning, gardening). These structure various degrees of exposure to the common realm and modulate the relations between dwelling and outgoing.

Whole communities may also be conceived in layers, as illustrated in the plan for a segment of Louisville presented by Raymond L. Gindroz. There the various patterns of access, vegetation, building type and institutional location were layered into a contrapuntal plan that provides a multifaceted environment, concretely related to the conditions of the place. Such places offer zones of differentiated space, which multiple inhabitants may fill with their activities and imagining.

Another device for creating layers of meaning and connection to place is what one participant described as “latching on to something that I had nothing to do with”—in other words, absorbing into the process of composing a place some aspect of what is already there. Latching on to, or incorporating, initiatives not one’s own is a fundamental form of enrichment, adding depth to the experiences that a place can afford. It can mean borrowing site-specific wisdom already resident in the place. Both familiar public space structure and predictable forms of building can provide an essential path to common understanding for the residents of the community.

To sustain continued attention and interest, however, the places we build need to extend and transform the qualities with which they are connecting. The Andersson house, described by Chris Wise, does this with modesty, grace and wit. The Cibollo Creek Ranch compound, with fortified farm and additions, preserves an historical structure and, at first, appears to replicate it in the addition. Yet the compound is subtly and decisively establishing new patterns of living, layering them onto the powerful, foreboding form and organization of this adobe dwelling lodged in the desert.



Moore/Andersson compound, Austin. Hall leading to den.
Photograph by Timothy Hursley.

An Urban Assembly Kit

Raymond L. Gindroz

Imagine, for a moment, the time in the evening that James Agee evoked, when people sit on their porches, talk to each other, relax and watch what is happening in the street. It is an image about what is familiar and controlled in our own domain and what surprises might come down the road—about a complex realm of social associations and physical form that are part of a fundamentally American tradition.

Agee's description is a beautiful diagram of American social and spatial structure. The street is the most public part of this space; the sidewalk, defined by stately trees, is also public; the most private realm is the house behind the windows. Between the street and house are the magical inventions of the front lawn and front porch, part of our own domain as well as the public realm. We are individuals, with houses of different styles and shapes, yet our houses come together to form the plane of the street because we also share a common responsibility for the public realm, which we enhance with flowers and hedges and ornaments.

Most streets like this were built during rapid building booms by production builders working under tight cost constraints. Yet it is hard to find an unbeautiful house, a street with things that are repeated too often, a block that doesn't have its own personality. Clearly there was some form of consensus among the parties involved in building these places—one that we could learn from today.

This relationship of house to street has become one of my central preoccupations. Much of my firm's practice has been focused on one particular kind of sterile and austere environment in which all of the trappings of this complex web of human associations have been stripped away—public housing projects. We had some early successes in urban neighborhoods in places like Cleveland, Norfolk and Richmond, and began to wonder how the lessons might carry through to newly developing communities. How, in the production-builder world, in which everything is so segmented, can we create wonderful neighborhoods?

For us, pattern books have been a source of inspiration. Pattern books are not hostile to builders, which is how builders usually perceive design guidelines; early on, they were helpful companions, full of hints that made life easier as you built a house. Then they evolved into plan books that showed plans and illustrations—helpful not only to building a house but also to marketing it. Still later, the books were linked to manufacturers, both of building parts and of entire kits that could be purchased, delivered and assembled into houses. This was a revelation to us. You could buy windows that are good windows, doors that are good doors. You could think about the design of houses

as related to parts and pieces that are good, and set up patterns for putting them together.

Our work came to the attention of the Disney Development Corporation as it was starting work on Celebration. The plan, by Robert A. M. Stern and Cooper–Robertson and Partners, called for a new town with the qualities of a traditional town that you might find in the Southeast. Stern and Cooper–Robertson prepared renderings of a sociable, amiable, small Southern town—a variety of buildings, air between the houses, gracious porches looking to the street, windows visible. Our charge was to help implement this idea. The only catch was that it had to be built by production and custom builders operating in the Orlando area.

The Celebration Company involved twenty-two local builders and five national builders in developing the Celebration pattern book. They joined the Celebration design team to go on tours, talk about environments and talk about the best way to build houses. We took the builders' standard plans and started tinkering: How do you eliminate the bulbous mushroom roofs and create a traditional house in which there is a two-story main body and a series of wings? How can you accommodate market demand for a bigger first floor and smaller second floor into traditional forms? Working with the builders, we arrived at the Celebration house: the main body must face the street, and the front door must be in the main body. If the house is on a corner, it must have an L-shaped configuration that wraps the corner and defines all the public spaces.

Small Southern towns have more than one architectural style in them. In Celebration we established six styles, and the pattern book includes six categories of guidelines to implement each of them.

We started by thinking about the house as an object, abstracted from its site. What are the most essential qualities of each style? The first page of guidelines, therefore, describes the essential qualities of a type, with background on its history, character and basic patterns.

The second page considers the massing of the house, issues such as roof pitch, height and overall form. Then we address special elements that are related to the basic mass. For example, in Classical houses there is great emphasis on porches, some two stories tall.

Windows and doors are the third consideration. These are among the most important elements: because they are the most visible, figural elements of a house, our eyes are drawn to them. Conversely, they provide our eyes on the street.

There is a page for special elements, such as porches or dormer windows, and another page for materials and colors. There is a materials list, an illustrative elevation

with key details and specifications for an appropriate color palette.

On the final page, the pattern book presents what we call possibilities. The joy of pattern making is that the combinations are endless. The possibilities page shows different lot widths, from small to large, different building heights, from one story to two-and a-half stories—all within one style. When you start multiplying you get an incredible combination of possibilities for putting together the parts and pieces.

Of course, this is not only about the fronts of houses, it is about making community, which brings up considerations of the house's relationship to the street. In the pattern book there is a composite diagram of a framework of streets and public open space, a kind of skeleton within which the houses themselves fit.

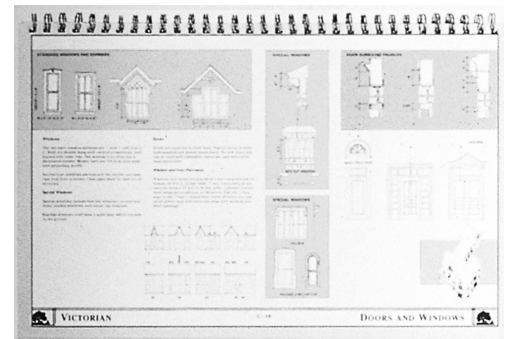
We've now begun to think of these elements at an even broader scale, as an "urban assembly kit" that can be applied to strengthen existing neighborhoods or create new ones. The urban assembly kit concerns itself with a hierarchical framework of lots and houses, streets and blocks, and neighborhoods and public open space. While the character, shape and size of these parts varies in response to local conditions and culture, the categories of elements are constant. Through the analysis of individual elements, we can better appreciate the relationships among them.

We've applied this approach to Park DuValle, a HOPE VI project in a Louisville neighborhood where 1,100 public housing units in deteriorated, abandoned apartment buildings once stood.

Streets. The first step was to lay out a pattern for the streets. We mapped new streets that connect to existing streets, linking to adjacent neighborhoods. There are six different cross sections of streets, each of which carries different traffic flows and creates its own character of address—because, after all, streets are not just for traveling from one place to another, but they are for creating addresses.

Blocks. The framework of streets and open space establishes the patterns of blocks, which offer a variety of opportunities for development. The Park DuValle plan provides a choice of six block types: Some are alley loaded, others are front loaded; some are deep enough to accommodate commercial and multi-family development, others can accommodate houses.

Lots and buildings. Residential blocks are divided into individual lots. In Celebration, the developers took a big risk to depart from then-conventional practices of building single-income enclaves by mixing lot sizes (and therefore price) on a single block. They did this by having like



Doors and Windows Victorian



Page from a publication about the Celebration Pattern Book, illustrating options for windows and doors in a Victorian house. Courtesy Urban Design Associates.



Park DuValle, Louisville.

Above: Blockfront, with mix of housing types. Courtesy Stull and Lee.

Below: Semi-detached house. Courtesy William Rawn and Associates.

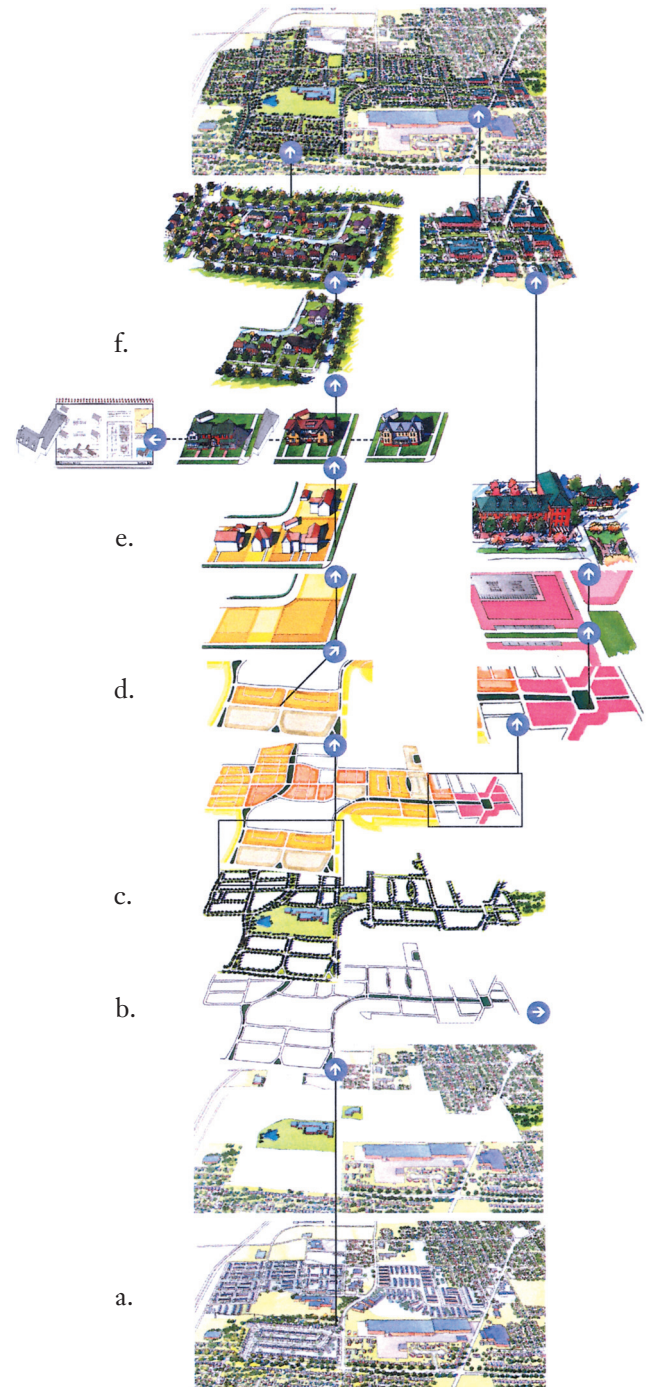
products face each other across a street and then change as they go around the corner.

We now consider this to be too conservative and try to mix size and cost as much as possible. In Park DuValle, each block can have up to seven different lot types, each of which can accommodate any one of several building types providing for variety while preserving the overall aesthetic integrity of the block and neighborhood. For example, a corner lot could be used for a small apartment building, a two-unit corner building or a large, single-family house. At the same time, duplexes and single-family houses might be deployed on a single block to help facilitate a mixed-income character to the neighborhood.

Architectural style. Drawing on the finest characteristics of regional architectural styles and traditions ensures that a new or revitalized neighborhood can claim its place in the larger context. For Park DuValle, this meant creating three architectural styles—Louisville Classical, Victorian and Craftsman. Architects William Rawn of Boston and Stull and Lee of Boston designed the different building types for the rental houses, using the pattern book, and there were numerous architects for the for-sale houses.

What does it look like in the end? This assembly kit of simple elements has the power and the flexibility to produce a rich and complex environment. The potential for different combinations is almost limitless. In Park DuValle, we have three architectural styles for seven building types on seven different lot types, for six block types that are defined by six different kinds of street space. When this relatively simple set of parts is assembled, the result is an urban environment as complex and rich as the traditional neighborhoods from which it gains its inspiration.

Our goal is to see if it is possible to work with many architects and builders to rebuild the process through which the place of houses is clear in the creation of neighborhoods and in which houses at the production level, as well as the architectural design level, can begin to create real places.



The Urban Assembly Kit relates different scales of urban form to each other in a layered hierarchy. The existing conditions (a) are layered with a new framework of streets (b) and public open space and civic buildings (c). The streets and spaces create block patterns (d), which are subdivided with a range of block types (e), which in turn support a range of building types (f). A pattern book provides guidance on architectural styles of individual buildings (f). Courtesy Urban Design Associates.