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The Virtues of Cities

We want to spread out, we want to stand apart. Few such dreams support city making, which traditionally has meant making places that endure. Partly because of our uncertain

We Americans have long shown an ambivalence towards the city. We have been ambivalent about the value of urbanity to our culture, about the appropriate form that the city should take and, especially, about where one individuals are best placed in relationship to the city.

Americans always dream of having a good place to live, but their dreams do not often enough include the city. How is “a good place to live” imagined? People dream of a charming porch, a conversation held across a trimly kept yard, a bicycle leaning against a picket fence, lots of green space or a stately home. As enticing as these evocations are, they do not depict a city very well.

convictions about the city, our urban visions oscillate with

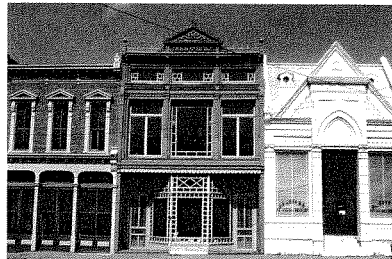
Indeed, a number of American cultural predilections inadvertently work against establishing good urban places to live. Among our yearnings, for example, is the desire to be on the move. We want to move up, physically, socially and economically. We want to move away, start again, do it better the next time around. We want to spread out, stand apart, express our individuality. We want to occupy a sizable parcel of land. Hence a popular late-nineteenth century railroad poster soliciting

through symbolism (or is it irony), placing monumental lions to guard our mobile home parks.

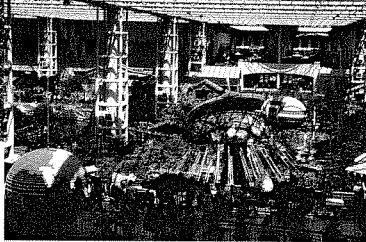
Such yearnings for progress, mobility, individuality and space continue to determine thousands of choices for dwelling on the periphery of cities. Not surprisingly, municipal officials, town planners and mayors frequently remark on the diminishing urbanity within their communities. Of course, they do not phrase it that way. They decry the popularity of regional malls, lament the lack



increasing frequency.



Estranged from the new city, we seek



migration to California promised “43 million acres of lands untaken! A climate for health and wealth, without cyclones or blizzards.”

Ever on the move, we have shown more interest in consuming than in maintaining or nurturing. We want to progress. We believe in the new, and in the future, although increasingly the new must have the feel or look of being old. It is not the quarter acre that we already own but one of the tens of millions yet untaken about which we dream. Notions of rootedness, stability and permanence of place, which in many cultures are identified with good places to live and with urbanity, have been a less pressing concern among Americans. We are content with depicting stability

of activity along main street, worry about the decrease in downtown investment and the migration of residents and businesses to outlying areas. They blame sprawl for their problems while envying the good fortune of prosperous suburbs.

In pondering how their towns and cities might confront such challenges they often, paradoxically, outline a vision that emulates the perceived advantages of life on the periphery. It is not certain whether such emulation ever brings residents, merchants or places of work back to town. But this emulation clearly contributes to the erasure of distinctions between cities, suburbs, hamlets and other forms of settlement. This homogenization has been an underlying goal of

Left to right: Lions guarding mobile home park; Mall of America, Bloomington, Minn.; Main Street, New Harmony, Ind.; Newbury Street, Back Bay, Boston. Photos courtesy Alex Krieger.



American city design, yet its ramifications have not been fully considered.

Pondering human nature, Ralph Waldo Emerson often reflected on the difficulty of acquiring, much less maintaining, both “rural strength and religion” and “city facility and polish.” Less philosophical by nature and not inhibited by metaphysical opposites, town boosters before and especially since Emerson have sought, often claimed, to overcome this difficulty. Their efforts to establish what others have ennobled as the “middle landscape,” “borderlands,” “garden cities” or “edge

lating city life amidst nature. It should be about maintaining proximity to both of the realms, city and nature, that are necessary for sustaining civilization. The successful suburb requires the continuing existence of both city and nature — preferably nearby.

Thus, to compete with their ever spreading peripheries, cities and towns might best maintain their own virtues. Under the leavening forces of rampant disaggregation, however, we need frequent reminders of what those virtues are.

Propinquity. In an age promising ever more



comfort in convention. We build

places

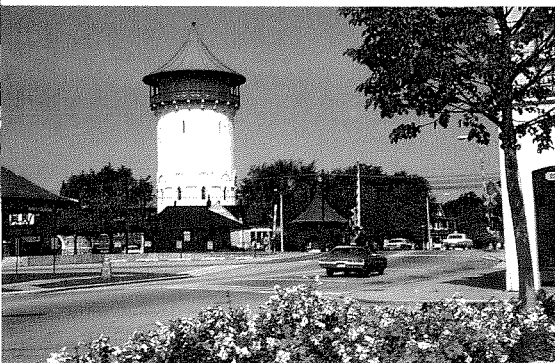
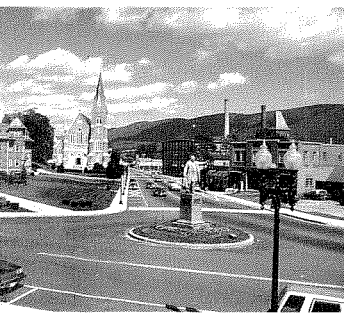
Left to right:
Las Colinas, Tex.;
downtown Pittsburgh;
Forest Hills Gardens, Queens,
New York City; Roland Park,
Baltimore; Statue of President
McKinley, North Adams, Mass.;
water tower, Riverside, Ill.; City
Hall, Buffalo, N.Y.

cities” ultimately reinforce Emerson’s doubts. The great swaths of development between the ever receding country and the ever thinning town seem conducive to acquiring neither rural strength and religion nor city facility and polish.

So perhaps Woody Allen’s claim that he is “two with nature” contains a useful insight about town design. The long-standing American yearning for a state of settlement in which the virtues of urbanity and nature are enjoyed simultaneously has been exposed as a form of fool’s gold that devalues both town and country. We may, at last, be at the point of understanding empirically what early advocates of the model suburb hypothesized: The idea of the suburb should not be about simu-

instant communication it is easy, but wrong-headed, to assume that physical proximity is no longer important. Perhaps the fundamental virtue of cities is that they still bring people together, they are where society engages itself face to face.

Consider that each day some 75,000 people visit the Mall of America, located conveniently outside Minneapolis and St. Paul. Do they go there merely to shop, or is the place popular because it enables a primitive kind of propinquity to occur? Some mall-goers do shop (although retail sales lag behind industry standards), while more seem to be riding the indoor roller coaster, posing with the giant Snoopy, building Lego® castles and enjoying the crowd.



wonderful by the fact that so few of

us have ever visited it. It exists in our imagination, and therefore is the stuff

Our need for contact with others is so great that we will commute great distances to places like malls, forgetting they are but simulations of environments traditionally found in cities. The popularity of recreational shopping, tourism, theme parks, sporting events, specialized museums, movie theatres and even charity walk-a-thons expresses our subliminal need for social contact — often for the sheer pleasure of it.

Juxtaposed realms. The demise of vital downtowns parallels the rise in the use of the term “central business district.” Why would anyone want to live, shop, dine, relax, meet a friend, cruise in a convertible, attend a concert, see a movie, go to school, take a walk with a sweetheart or simply hang out in a place called the “central business district”? The appeal of downtowns has become diminished even for businesses, which eventually leave in search of environments that offer their employees a wider array of amenities.

Lewis Mumford once defined a town as the place where the greatest number of activities are congregated in the smallest geographical area. Instead of pining for the return of business interests to the downtown we should turn our attention to overcoming the absence of all other interests.

Density. An essential ingredient of a town is its density, measured not in square feet but in the juxtaposition of artifice with activity. “I have three chairs in my house,” Thoreau wrote, “one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.” Thoreau may have preferred solitude, but he understood the civilizing force of aggregation.

Density, as distinct from congestion, promotes engagement. Human interaction, made possible

by proximity, is far more difficult to sustain where things are spread out across great distance, the fax and e-mail notwithstanding.

Photographer Alfred Steiglitz often urged his students to move in a little closer, to crop their scene a little tighter, after they composed a shot. Similar advice would benefit those who build the American city. Outside of a few pockets of genuine congestion, greater proximity among buildings and activities would enhance sociability. Cities have much to gain by filling in, and much to lose by thinning out.

Heterogeneity within an ordered fabric. Cities and towns offer an important lesson in both architecture and citizenship: buildings, like citizens, warrant their idiosyncrasies so long as they behave civilly toward their neighbors.

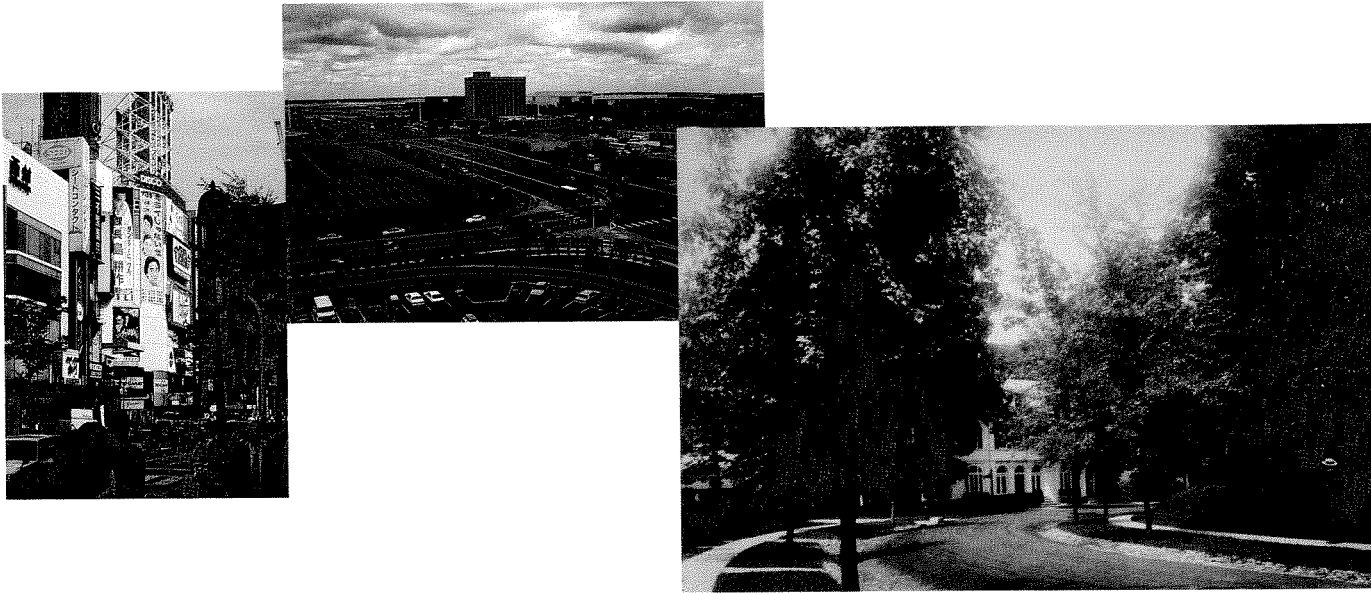
The beauty of Boston’s Back Bay lies in the tension between the similarities and differences among the facades along a block, and in the repetition of such blocks along streets that differ subtly in dimension, landscaping, edge definition and principal use.

But when buildings and people are isolated on lots of one half-acre or more, the need for civility lessens. Indeed, there is an illusion of autonomy about buildings spread over a vast landscape. You can presume an indifference toward your neighbors when you are not arrayed cheek-by-jowl.

Neighbors unlike ourselves. The diverse house types found in towns and cities can accommodate a variety of social, economic and age groups. Some of the most charming early suburbs, like Forest Hills Gardens in Queens and Roland Park in Baltimore, also contained a rich mix

like Seaside, Florida, a wonderful place, made even more

of our dreams. When



of dwelling sizes and clusters.

This mixing is not particularly popular among contemporary suburban developers, many of whom cater their subdivisions to increasingly narrow segments of the population. A growing concern about such environments is that they breed indifference, or worse, intolerance, towards social groups whose members live beyond their gates. Such indifference is unlikely to promote democracy.

Towns have always been made up of defined neighborhoods and even enclaves. Nevertheless, regular interaction among groups is ensured by the proximity of these neighborhoods to each other and the streets and public spaces they share. Such interaction, or the promise of it, remains one of the advantages of town life.

Social landmarks. Landmarks confer coherence and legibility, not status. They highlight things that are meaningful to a community, like remembering a president or marking where water is stored. The landmarks in a town constitute a valuable lexicon that help residents understand — and commemorate — their time and place.

Landmarks are not produced by labeling or through form alone. This is apparently beyond the comprehension of those who name their shopping strip “Center Place” and their office park “Landmark Square,” and mark each with a faux campanile.

Texture and narrative. The many buffalo gargoyles on the face of Buffalo’s city hall not only are endearing but also relate the city’s name to an epoch of frontier urbanization. An old storefront in New Bedford, Mass., pulsates with reminders of whaling and trade ships; a street in modern Tokyo that exhibits the near-cacophony of a culture obsessed with digital technology.

Robert Browning’s comment that “less is more” was not intended to describe the visual texture of a town’s public realm. The aphorism’s principal modern proponent, Mies van der Rohe, could also be heard to say, “God rests in the details.”

The public face of towns and cities benefits from such excesses, which tell the many stories of how humans occupy a place. Towns and cities should cultivate the telling of these stories, and those yet unheard.

Connectivity. Some of today’s most frustrating rush hour snarls occur on the perimeter highways that pass through relatively uncrowded suburbs. Arterial highways channel traffic and, therefore, limit choice. Relief from congestion may be miles away, at the next set of exit ramps, and only then if one knows where the ramps lead.

A network of urban streets — even if narrow, crooked or redundant — provides actual choice and, more importantly, the promise of choice. By taking a quick left followed by a right, one can



conventions fail to solve our problems, then we turn



Left to right:
Tokyo; suburban street near
Phoenix; perfect street section,
Roland Park; Newport, R.I.;
view from restaurant interior
into a street; suburban
townhouses.

find a parallel street, avoid a traffic back-up, imagine a short cut or simply maintain a sense of control and freedom. This is an advantage that every city cabby understands, but few highway engineers ever acknowledge.

Streetfronts. In a typical contemporary subdivision the elements furthest from the street right-of-way seem to receive the greatest design attention. Unfortunately, this leaves much of what influences the experience of the public realm undesigned. On the inside of the fence in a Phoenix subdivision there are beautiful homes, immaculate lawns, wonderful terraces, decks and gardens. On the public side there is an corridor for circulation.

In 1904 an anonymous photographer produced a view of Roland Park that he labeled “the perfect street section.” Everything that is in the public eye is carefully designed — hedges, berms, drainage swales, sidewalks, tree alignments, stoops and porches — all of the pleasures provided by fronting on a street, instead of an artery.

Immediacy of experience. Americans are known for their dislike of walking. Yet they actually walk hundreds of yards each day through parking lots, shopping malls, corridors of large buildings and airport terminals. It is ironic how much of this walking is caused by providing for the conve-

nience of the automobile, and how much of it is forgettable.

The suburban landscape seems to only offer destinations. But in cities it is the seductions along an interesting path that make walking — and urban life — enjoyable.

Sustainability, persistence and adaptability. While few parts of any city warrant strict preservation, virtually all of them have potential for reuse. Unfortunately this is often overlooked in the zeal to build anew, usually somewhere else, under the dubious supposition that rebuilding will enable us to get it right the next time.

The town of Southfield, a few miles north of Detroit, now boasts a daily commuter population greater than Detroit’s. The chief advantages of Southfield, a strip of office parks strung along a highway, seem to be that it is new and not Detroit. With each new Southfield a Detroit withers, but, one suspects, only temporarily. Long after the single-function office towers of Southfield become outmoded (or simply less new and less profitable) the infrastructure, street system, history, monuments and neighborhoods of Detroit will persist to facilitate, even inspire, reuse.

The persistence of a city’s morphology and institutions strengthens people’s connections to a place. The archetypal suburban landscape, with

its coarse grain of development, relative absence of history and single-use zoning has yet to prove as adaptable as historic urban landscapes to changing social habits or needs.

Overlapping boundaries. A city is like a stack of translucent quilts, with layers of social, architectural and geographical strata — sometimes carefully, sometimes imperfectly registered. Subtle or precise, such overlapping of precincts is crucial to place-making.

An environment without perceivable boundaries is amorphous, indistinguishable from its surroundings and generally placeless. This is sadly characteristic of much of the modern metropolitan landscape. With apologies to Robert Frost, good fences may not insure good neighbors but neither does their absence foster connectivity or communality.

Public life. Downtown shopping malls like Toronto's Eaton Centre are marvels of design and magnets for activity. But a careful observer will note the limited range of activities allowed inside.

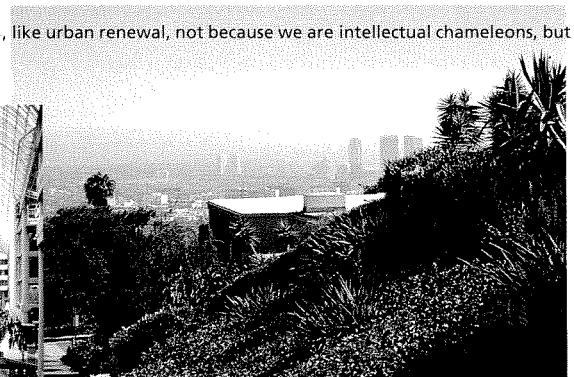
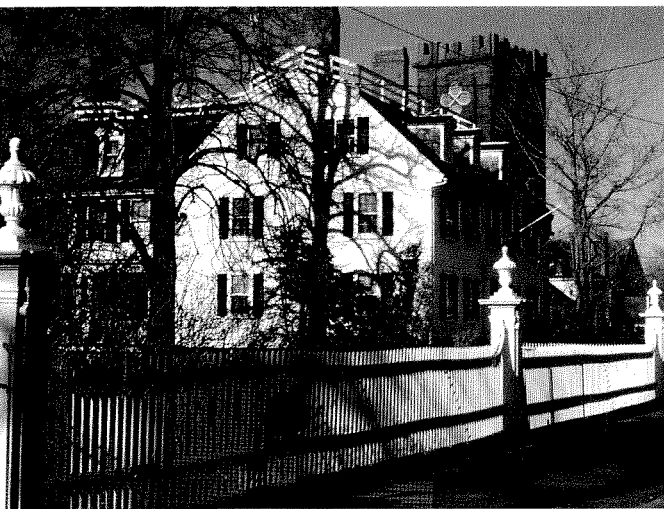
You will be ushered out unto the street for behavior deemed inappropriate by the management.

On the street, lowly or grand, you have re-joined the town. In a city the sense of proximity to a public realm remains palpable, with standards of acceptable public behavior discretely reinforced. An urban environment cherishes this relative openness and yields to privatization only with some reluctance.

The potential for a centered life. Against most planners' predictions, Los Angeles — the proverbial score of suburbs in search of a town — has recently grown a visible downtown. It is mostly a collection of corporate office towers, the product of speculative land economics at work. Yet perhaps there is something in human nature that seeks comfort in centering, and such vertical outcroppings of commerce satisfy that impulse, at least scenographically.

While there may be fewer economic and technological reasons for concentration, centers such

Left to right:
Salem, Mass.; Eaton Centre,
Toronto; Los Angeles;
Boston; Minneapolis;
Rockefeller Center,
New York City.



again to radical innovation, like urban renewal, not because we are intellectual chameleons, but because

as the new Los Angeles downtown are expressions of support for concentration as a matter of social choice rather than a residue of history.

This characterization of centering recalls Kevin Lynch's concepts of significance and consonance, and it occurs at varying scales of urban settlement. Certainly at any moment the reigning economic and political institutions require visible expressions of presence and power. A democratic society retains a healthy skepticism about such grand or imperial tendencies to center. Yet, at the scale of a town common, courthouse or city hall square, library, neighborhood school or even a particularly vital intersection, this tendency to center can be found.

There are those who continue to believe that we will disaggregate, migrating away from cities to live in closer proximity to the splendors of nature, with technology providing a modicum of electronic social contact. Then how does one explain the invention of the internet cafe? Will not the very

convenience of being able to perform most daily errands, most work functions and most business transactions from the privacy of our own homes (or anywhere else for that matter) compel us to escape from our disengagement from society?

The virtue of the contemporary city is that it retards the isolation we have so doggedly crafted for ourselves. In the city — and nowhere else, as poignantly — a citizen can still partake of the pleasures of overlap, the pleasures of proximity, the pleasure of propinquity.

the essential nature of the city remains elusive. The contemporary city remains elusive in part because of its immensity and in part because of our desire to escape its amorphousness.

