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The Block and the Towpath Reconsidered

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The Block

Although sociologists and architectural critics have railed against the socially destructive nature of modernist housing experiments; as a child growing up in New York, I was unaware of modernist experiments. My immediate environs never changed during my fifteen-year tenancy there. We were reassured that we would probably grow out of the neighborhood but that the buildings were there forever. Television was just arriving on the scene, so I was not really informed about a sense of place. However, I knew I lived in an apartment house because there were many mailboxes in the entry and my mother kept dreaming of moving to the suburbs and a house of her own. Nevertheless, my formative years provided a lasting impression, an urban experience confined by the space between apartment buildings, the street, or, in colloquial terms, the block. Ours was truly a socially constructive rather than destructive experiment, and we took the public arena as our own, transforming it from a need for our own vernacular.

When I was old enough to be allowed out in the street, my first awareness was one of geographic boundaries. The continuous unbroken facades on both sides of the street became the physical and visual backdrop for activity. At both ends of the

block there were vast raging rivers of speeding cars that were to be traversed only by the most adventurous.

□



1

1 The stoop, 1955.

The Towpath

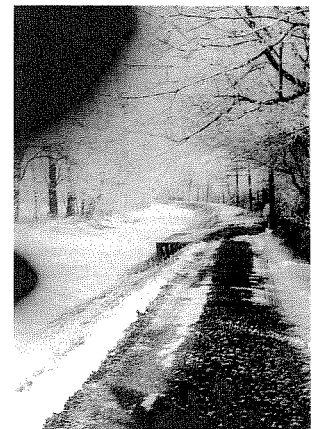
While Michael was growing up on a city block with only metaphorical rivers of cars, I was growing up on a towpath, a long, narrow alleyway between the real waters of a brackish brown canal and the sparkling and swift Delaware River. The towpath, this packed dirt lane, only wide enough for one car or two mules, passed by six houses, of which ours was the last and farthest from the main road. For me, it was the avenue for exploration.

When the canal was dug, it was intended for transportation, but by the time of my childhood this use was the furthest from anyone's mind. By then, the canal was a source of recreation: the summer brought mule-drawn barges full of boisterous camera-laden tourists past our door and winter marathon ice skating parties that demanded frequent warm-up stops at neighbors' houses along the route.

As on the block, the geographic boundaries of our environment were linear, self-contained and open-ended; yet, unlike the block, the towpath was solitary, without a sense of neighborhood, events were contrived in reaction to natural occurrences, and, as I now know, in the name of progress man could

irreversibly change the environment with the swiftness of the river at flood time.

□



2

2 Canal and Towpath in winter, 1948.



3

Ostensibly, the buildings had no backs, and I can't remember ever venturing out to this vast, cavernous, barren hollow, used mostly to hang laundry. Our lives were oriented toward the street. Even the apartments were of little consequence. In fact, I don't even recall apartment interiors, yet I knew just about every tenant by sight and name—all from interaction on the street.

As I began to feel my way around the block, there were rules to be obeyed, a sort of rite of passage. At first you were only allowed to sit and play on your own stoop, then maybe your immediate sidewalk, to be followed by triumphant forays into the gutter or down the block to visit other stoops and other sidewalks. You began to know the local haunts, where the young toughs sat defiantly on the fenders of parked cars, the "Spanish steps" where everyone gathered at dusk to listen to the radio. You knew the secret doorways where you could date. You began to identify with a particular group—a gang in a benign sense—who appropriated the turf around certain buildings, the leader perched on the highest step of the stoop, with his lieutenants congregating beneath.

□

I guess "bank" a canal or berm bank—that ledge of land that held the canal while forming the back wall

of our living room—was a part of our vocabulary unknown to city kids. Unfamiliarity with banks proved treacherous to numerous guests of my parents, such as the Canadian couple who arrived for dinner after dark and parked on the towpath. The unwitting wife, in her new mink and high heels, found herself plunging down a muddy bank into the waters of an icy cold canal rather than entering a warm foyer as expected. There was always trouble navigating cars on the one-lane towpath—even a pedestrian had to squeeze up next to a house or duck into a porch to let a car go past. Once my uncle drove up the bank from our driveway, missed the towpath, and landed his car sideways in the canal in broad daylight.

Banks provided a landscape with a hierarchy of artificial levels: the canal and towpath, the house and lawn, the river. Such terracing was our "street" grid, our orienting device as kids. Growing up meant the ability to leave the middle level and venture both to the towpath above and the river below.

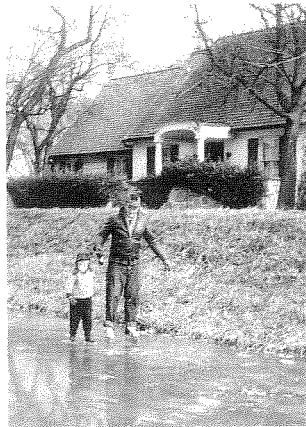
□

3 Uncle's car down canal bank, 1947.

Noise was the energizing factor. Sounds were ironically mellifluous as they reverberated from the structures, an acoustic transcendence that rivaled the best of rock and roll. The sounds included not only the blaring of radios, occasional local scuffles, and squealing of a multitude of children but

the roar of crowds watching the monumental struggles of stickball games pitting one block against another: the 49th Street Barons versus the 50th Street Dukes, for example. Both organized and random noise focused attention on the street. There was also private noise made public, such as after-dinner discussions among adults who congregated in beach chairs on the sidewalk to debate local events over beer and cigarettes. The telephone was a convention of nuisance, and completely superfluous. All you really had to do was to lean out the window to communicate with your neighbor. When I needed to get in touch with a friend, I stood in front of his window, called his name, and a conversation ensued. If privacy was mandatory, the quiet lamplight of a proverbial corner, narrow hallways, or an abandoned car could provide it.

□



One side of the double-fronted houses along the towpath opened onto the higher level, a sort of formal second-story entrance. The other side looked out across a wide lawn onto the river below. The split levels of these houses, each situated on a couple acres of land, created an abundance of steps and passages that to me seemed secret and special. Three houses down from ours was my favorite haunt, in memory a sea of green—ivy that clung to the stone walls and shutters and a willow tree that swept out over the towpath and canal.

It was the only house perpendicular to the towpath, its orientation creating an alleyway stepped to the lower front door, cool and dark yet romantically luxurious.

The most friendly and at the same time scariest inhabitants of my towpath route were the dogs, creatures always somehow distinctly matched to their respective houses or yards. At the house of lush greenness lived an exotic, high-strung whippet, while next door at the practical neighbor's, who was forever building a boat in his yard under the mottled sycamores, languished two friendly collies. Upriver, in less familiar territory, skulked vicious German shepherds, who tore at one's clothes, attacking with neither warning nor mercy from hiding places down banks or behind walls.

□

Street orientation was to be learned. Although building facades were an imposing, static perspective that vanished at each end of the block, I became cognizant of landmarks, distances, and direction from the dot zero of my house. I could distinguish different residences by color, doorway, or configuration of the stoop. I would identify the neighbors by their windows and more specifically by their fire escapes, which were usually outfitted with eclectic furniture, their public interiors. As I recall, many fire escapes were affixed to

4 Skating on the canal in front of our second-story entrance.

the front rather than the back of the houses, since no outlet exited to the rear. These were considered part of the street rather than the building, balconies rather than external stairways. People slept on them, did homework on them, cock-tailed on them, and used them as bleachers during street sporting events. Manhole covers and street lamps were very valuable, as all distance was measured by “sewers” and “poles,” as in, “I can hit three sewers,” a sure sign of athletic superiority.

□



My father resolved that he would never live anywhere but on a river. Just after moving into our house, he enlarged all the riverfront windows, allowing us to “live” outside as much as possible. He loved to sit in the dining room watching the river amble by, the glistening of reflected light. In fact, he installed a mirror on the back wall of the dining room so that no one would ever be without a river view while eating. The picture windows framed the stage of outdoor lawn activities as well—my brother’s periodic climb to the top of the spreading but shakey dogwood, batting practice and tree maze parties.

While the house seemed a sanctuary in this watery environment, flood time always proved suspenseful. During thaws or heavy rains we would post stakes on the lawn to measure the river’s upward progress overnight.

The potential confluence of river and canal, the dissolving of the bank, rendering our house a submerged container of mud, caused childhood nightmares, visions of fish, frogs and snakes in our beds, whirlpools carrying logs, old tires and floating islands from basement to attic. And in the summer of 1955 the river did keep coming, only receding after it was four feet high in our living room.

□

As I began to find acceptance in the society of the block, I became more aggressive in participating in the creative appropriation, the transformation of custom and ritual. Everything between the buildings took on the aspect of street furniture to be rearranged and reused. For me at that age, play was my primary and only objective. Lines scored into the poured concrete sidewalks were ideal for hopscotch and box ball. Walls offered the perfect surface for handball and served as buttresses for late-night games of Johnny-on-the-pony. Stoops were not only for sitting; they were inevitably adapted for stoop ball, some with dull noses giving back little; others perfect for high-arching “killers.” Lampposts were the natural vegetation; the two living trees on the block seemed alien. We climbed the lampposts like Jungle Gyms, hung effigies from them at Halloween, and rallied around them during games of hide-and-seek. Hide-and-seek proved the most

5 Our house from the tow-path looking down toward Delaware River, 1948.

adventurous of urban games, as we had to be resourceful in exploring unknown nooks and crannies of the built environment. Fire hydrants were to be vaulted and opened during the torrid summers, flooding the streets like Venetian canals. Trash cans, a euphemism for the building's detritous were our musical instruments and source of bottles returned for deposit to purchase the sustenance of penny candy.

□

Our driveway hurtled down a 45° bank from the towpath and occupied a large area between the house and barn/garage. Paved and enclosed by walls, the secluded parking area became the sports arena—my brother's basketball hoop installed on the two-story barn at one end and my sandbox at the other.

Living closely with nature, we were more conscious of the change of seasons and their accompanying colors than city kids. For example, along the canal bank my mother planted a cluster of azaleas, which in springtime covered the bank with a wash of hot pink that long predated Shappirelli. This gave notice that soon we could watch for nests of bunnies and begin turning rocks for crayfish along the river bank.

Solitary games come strongly to mind in remembering the towpath house. My sandbox, a locale of countless hours of self-amusement, occupied a protected corner of the

driveway, confined by stone walls so high that when I sat down I could not see out. Between the sandbox and the wall was our version of a manhole cover to which I usually paid little or no attention. Once, after fixing the pump, the plumber left the cover slightly ajar, and while standing back to observe a sandbox marvel of my own making, I stepped on the lid, flipped it over and found myself 20 feet down a dark, vertical cylinder. Stunned, yet unhurt, I discovered the steel rung ladder and pulled myself out. The experience of such an alien context, a dark underground void, contrasted sharply with the familiar spatial hierarchy of bank and level that I had learned to trust. And I experienced for the first time that disturbing feeling that comes with the consequence of ignoring the environment, that my uncle must have felt in driving his car down the canal bank and my father felt in watching his house bloated with river water.

□

Chalk was our artistic medium, as spray paint was not yet in vogue. Fluid and temporal, our chalk masterpieces were dissolved by recurring rain or buckets of wash water from irate landlords. Childlike scribbles and pithy sayings were commonplace, but schematic drawings were often the order of the day. Scoreboards on walls recorded the day's events. Love notes let us know who was going out with whom. Gameboards,

like skelsey, a sort of Par-cheesi with bottle caps, were scribed and bases and playing fields were marked, all instigated by the urges for experimental play within the confines of the street's grid. At day's end, a rainbow of colors transformed the landscape of the block that was ultimately germane to the constructed experience yet visibly alien to the context.

□

All energy flowed up the bank and down the towpath from our house, that earthen berm defining our zone, our world of play and adventure. The banks not only supported the houses but also dictated their structure and orientation. My memory bank is filled with grassy slides and muddy rocks, with endless encounters at the watery perimeters of a house that in actuality no longer exists. Not long ago it was demolished to make way for a thruway bridge to span the river. Now all that remains are the walls, banks and flagstone terraces as reminders that the natural environment sometimes so threatening was less ferocious in effecting changes than those wrought by man.

□

All energy flowed into the street, that strip of black tar bordered by delineating curbs. The buildings, sidewalks and anthropomorphic street furniture focused attention on the arena of cultural enactment. The grand parade of the city block encompassed gang skirmishes, symbolic ball games, scooter races, promenades of young couples

and Elysian Fields of block parties. Time on our block was nonexistent. For me as a youngster, time was structured and arbitrarily terminated by my mother's call to come home and go to bed. As a block of time, a block in time, its duration eludes my grasp, beyond the notion that I am no longer there. My memory keeps recalling instances, impressions and revelations framed by those buildings that some unenlightened souls say are mute.

■