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Places are what we live in. Not just buildings or spaces or geographies or fantasies, but some curious amalgam in which they are the principal parts. And this amalgam imposes its structure around our lives, influencing how we spend our time, whom we encounter, and what aspects of the world are readily available to our attention.

While each of us constructs a realm of private places that are uniquely conditioned by our own memories and experiences, the underlying physical structure of public places and the opportunities for experience that they afford or deny are a common structure that serve as an underlying force in the character of the community.

How may critical thought be applied to this commonality? We make changes to our world through works, through the concentrated efforts of individuals and organizations. Our professions are also organized around types of work. Hence, most criticism of the environment, of places, adopts an intrinsic model that characterizes the history of architecture: namely, to consider each work as one in a chain of works, then to examine the development and change in the career of the architects or in the development and spread of a particular form or way of organizing buildings; or to consider the evolution of cultural norms as represented in a succession of works.

In each model, the single work tends to be the point of focus

then quickly becomes subsumed in discussions that range far afield from the place at hand. The work, not the place that is created out of the intersection of that work with the surroundings and the imaginations of its users, and not the extended range of settlement of which it is a part, is what gets discussed and criticized. Often not even the work is discussed. Rather what critics tend to focus on is a set of ideas of which the work is seen in some way to be emblematic. What are the characteristics of critical thought that bring this about and how do they influence our attention?