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### Urbanism - Toward a More Humanized Environment

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ESSAYS PRESENTED TO  
D. KENNETH SARGENT

THE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE  
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY SYRACUSE, NEW YORK

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## URBANISM—TOWARD A MORE HUMANIZED ENVIRONMENT

NORMAN PRESSMAN

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The city in its plastic realization of the needs and ideals of man is without doubt one of the highest forms of collective art. It is designed both by man and for man. Its outline, its form, its play of solid and void, its character, its scale—whether these stem from man, its basic organism, or from its materials, from its site, from its past or present life style, or from the importance of its location, population, and specialization; these are the primary elements which usually constitute its personality. The city is a tool for the production and exchange of goods and services. That is perhaps one of its major functions. But it is also a place where people live, study, play, worship, or have children. It may be a place of magic or of terror, of beauty or of ugliness.

Cities have been the chief, if not the only laboratory, for experimentation in living, for interrupting the continuity of traditions and encouraging new ideas, new patterns, and new expectations whereby human advances have been made. Cities have tolerated deviation from the norms of conduct, have allowed relations not elsewhere permitted; they have encouraged individuality; they have fostered creativity in almost all human endeavors, but more especially in art, literature, music, the professions, and science.

Cities throughout their long histories have faced persistent problems of urban living, and according to the prevailing climate of opinion, they have usually ignored them or compromised with them. Sometimes they have even attempted to cope with them. Cities which have been exposed to catastrophies such as flood, fire, epidemic, and war, have exhibited an amazing capacity for recovery, often emerging stronger and richer, with even enhanced capacities for survival and urban living, such as many of the major European cities which we know today. We might well take note of the central area redevelopment schemes for cities such as Coventry, London, Rotterdam or Stockholm, in order to better understand the manner in which the potential inherent in these urban environments has been maximized, in the process of their rebuilding. But never before in the history of mankind have cities either been confronted with such magnitudes of people and complexity or had so little time to come to grips with them, since the trend from rural to urban living has proceeded at such speed.

The form of the city has always been and shall continue to be one of the merciless indicators of the state of man's culture, civilization, and aspirations. This form is today generally determined by the multiplicity of decisions—social, political, economic, and design—made by the people and their representatives who live in it. In many periods throughout history, these decisions have interacted to produce forces of such clarity and form that noble cities have been born. Particularly in North American cities, man has been denied the satisfaction of his need for order, identification, participation, and esthetic enjoyment that rests the soul or stimulates the mind, and yet it has been said that the "humane" city must not only serve us well or be functional, but that it must also please our senses.

It appears that those cities most generally admired and from which the inhabitants are most reluctant to be severed are precisely those with highly developed personalities. Anyone can prepare such a list—Paris, Rome, Venice, Amsterdam, London, Peking; the names are not likely to differ greatly. If one were also to include North American cities, recognition would in all probability be given to New York, Washington, Boston, San Francisco, Montreal, and Quebec. One thing is clear however, that these cities always make a deep physical impression and present strong esthetic characteristics even though these may not always be man-made, and may be attributed in many instances to the natural qualities of the site. Certainly one of the most forceful examples of any city exhibiting such characteristics would be the citadel or city of Quebec, to the extent that the relationship to its site has been the prime factor in establishing that city's dramatic image. Indeed, the city grows from its site, and is inseparably wedded to it. The serpentine streets joining the upper and lower towns recognize in almost every detail the site's inherent topography. From its deep reverence for the site, in addition to its ancient strategic location, the city has in turn demanded and received the respect of all who inhabit and visit it. Montreal was also such a city during the middle of the 18th century when its location and form, wedged in between the riverfront and the dominant Mont-Royal, respected those features and related to them. However the late 19th and 20th century suburban sprawl ceased for the most part to recognize these elements. Today, however, this city is once again beginning to realize the potential of its original river site and is exploiting this situation for the benefit of all, as at the 1967 Expo site and in the current proposal for the new community on Nun's Island in the St. Lawrence. In the majority of these cities, at some periods in their histories, certain groups or individuals, usually with clear aspirations and intent, have imposed their impress, very often in the form of a strong design "structure."

### **Urban Character and Esthetic**

We know that a city's character or personality is made up of a great number of diverse factors including sensory stimuli as well as visual—smells, noises, tastes, people, history, associations; in addition to its sights. A city is not architecture alone, perhaps not even principally. Most of the city's stimuli are actually outside the control of the city or urban designer. He alone cannot write the whole symphony; however, we do know that the design "structure" of the city, which he is able to orchestrate, in displaying sensitivity to all of the other inputs and to the nature of the site, appears to be one of the most powerful factors in determining the responses of those who experience its force. "What is essentially needed for the city to function properly—not only from the viewpoints of housing, traffic, zoning, parks, services, and the like, but also in the sense of its own individual esthetic uniqueness—is a physical order or structure which it can only obtain by having all of its constituent parts so organized as to relate to one another; some dominant, some neutral, and some subservient to the whole, where the eye is guided from one visual event to another in such a manner as to be stimulated by an episode without losing track of the main theme.

The character of a city cannot be created by the mere interpretation of statistical data and the allocation of space by "functional" considerations alone. On the contrary, these functional requirements must, for the most part, find their expression within the formal framework of definite spatial relationships, repre-

senting the body of the city as an esthetic entity. Man can comprehend the abstract logic of statistical rationalization only with great difficulty, whereas he can more easily grasp visual and spatial relationships, the meanings of which become still more enhanced by filling them with functional content.<sup>1</sup>

The Rideau Canal park system in Ottawa is an excellent example of conscious physical-spatial organization or structure at the regional scale, in which the city's chief asset, the canal, has been preserved and enhanced, thus giving to the environment of the Capital a continuous green space and garden quality which constitutes its major esthetic character. It may be noted that this reverence for natural amenity, man-made or otherwise, has not generally been the rule, as in the case of cities such as Syracuse, New York, where the Erie Canal, which originally ran through the town center, has been filled in order to create that city's main vehicular artery with all of the visual chaos inherent in road-stand eating establishments, second-hand car lots, trash heaps, and uncoordinated neon signs.

The first level of urbanity is physical. There are places of great silence, even reverence, and places of robust noise; places of even bombastic monumentality and places of intimate scale; places of pure visual experience and places where the experience is confusing, even sometimes corrupt. The city has perceptible foci and places of rendezvous. Its experience is never desolate visually, though sometimes, perhaps often, it may be quite neutral, the better to frame the great visual experience that the rare, magnificent work of architecture provides better against a neutral background.<sup>2</sup>

Who has not been affected by the city's food and flower markets, its sidewalks, its trees and sculpture, its grand squares and fountains, its boulevards and parks, its sidewalk cafés (in those cities which possess this humanized social institution), its arcades and cobblestones, its street signs and lamp-posts, its chimney pots and canals.

When a city possesses that happy synthesis of both architectural and non-architectural elements, and where each of these has understood and respected the others, a strong image is formed. But without the skillful handling of the urban and architectural elements, this image would be practically non-existent.

### **The Humanized Environment**

It appears that the urban characteristics which truly make a City, would be:

- 1) compactness—INTIMACY
  - 2) intensity of public life—VITALITY
  - 3) intermingling in close proximity of all types of human activity—DIVERSITY
- There must also be a healthy balance between the pleasures and comforts of private life, and the values which only the public aspects of life can offer. In North America, this balance has been upset in favour of the private life, only at the expense and to the detriment of the public life. With this state of affairs we are robbing ourselves of the values of social intercourse and human face-to-face relationships, especially those which come about impromptu and spontaneously.

The root cause of this condition is the mass ownership of the motor car. The cities, in accommodating its presence—the proper course of action—have forgotten man's needs, who, it would appear, also craves the existence of a more human-scaled environment. The centers of our cities, which have traditionally served as the nuclei of urban life and the places which have always sponsored interaction and vitality, have been slowly eaten away by those elements which have been provided to accommodate the motor car—parking

structures, lots, highways, and interchanges, leaving in their wake little of environmental quality which has meaning and significance in terms of what the human pedestrian is capable of appreciating.

The chance meetings with other human beings, that are more often than not the more rewarding experiences, the face-to-face contacts amongst one's fellow men, and the opportunity to simply walk about, gaze into shop windows, or just stand and stare—the prime reasons why city centers have existed—all of these human experiences have begun to disappear. *"In Anti-city they cannot come about because the places that create the occasions do not exist"*<sup>3</sup> (emphasis mine). This tragic condition is due to the fact that we hold no true convictions about urban and human values. In searching for these convictions and related values we must bear in mind that the city, a creation of man, should serve man. It is not to provide better conditions for his vehicles (although that too, may be accomplished), but to recivilize and rehumanize his life. It is the urban designer, whose task it is to acquire mastery over the articulation of all of the elements which together create the physical city, and who must, within the overall framework of the planning process, create the places which will allow for the potential inherent in the various human situations, to actually occur.

We are slowly beginning to realize that the present conflicts between environment and traffic, and between vehicles and pedestrian movements can be reduced, but only within very strict limits. Attempts to provide for free car access to all buildings in the central areas, show diminishing returns—a point is reached where roads and car parks occupy a disproportionate amount of land, to the detriment of environmental quality. "Even in an area which can be redeveloped as a whole, unrestricted use of cars is impracticable if the present compact form of urban center is to be retained."<sup>4</sup> The separation of pedestrians and vehicles appears to be inevitable if we are to regain the human qualities so desperately needed, and which the urban centers of the world's major cities have always provided. This is not only proposed and even desired purely on the grounds of safety. That is not the only need of the pedestrian. The environment in which he moves must be worth looking at and experiencing. Pedestrians, moving ever more slowly than cars, are more conscious of the relationship and detailed design of buildings and spaces, of "character," of vistas and unexpected glimpses, of changes of level and of textual patterns; and it is precisely these elements which produce environment possessing human scale and meaning.

### **Efforts in Environmental Improvement**

Occasionally, we do attempt to recapture some of the urban qualities which have been so wanting in our cities. The city of Ottawa is a fine case in point where the major shopping and business street, Sparks Street, has been permanently closed to traffic after having been tested, by temporary closing of the street, for many summers prior to the official mall opening in 1967. The length of the mall itself is not completely free of traffic. There are two main controlled intersections, but the pedestrian is given priority throughout, and the improvement in the environment is clearly apparent. Flowers, trees, seating, kiosks, open-air exhibits, and an outdoor café have appeared in the street, which has been paved over. The exclusion of traffic has not led to loss of business; on the contrary, the majority of shops report increased sales as the mall has set up a people-oriented environment, full of diversity, colour, life, and vitality, and exerted its magnetism over the entire region.

However, Jacques Greber's recommendation to relocate the downtown railway terminal, in spite of its superb new design, remains highly questionable; for in the process of its removal, so too, has much of the downtown's vitality been removed.

Solutions similar to that of the Sparks Street Mall have also been implemented at Bastion Square in Victoria, B.C., as well as in many major European centers, including Cologne, Essen, Amsterdam, Brussels, and Copenhagen. Dufferin Terrace, at Quebec, is another fine example, and probably Canada's most theatrical meeting-place, where people of the town and visitors mingle in all seasons and in all moods.

Montreal has been that Canadian city, and indeed one of the most prominent examples in the world in which vast separation of vehicles and pedestrians has occurred in Vincent Ponte's plan for the subterranean walking city stretching from the Place Ville Marie to the Place Bonaventure and eventually to link up with Place Victoria. It is a superb solution in creating a human-scaled, climate-controlled, pedestrian environment.

Toronto has also exhibited a recent tendency in creating intimate spaces which are removed from vehicles. One can see them in the calm but humane enclaves such as the Lothian Mews and York Square, in Yorkville, and on a yet grander and more monumental scale at the City Hall Plaza. Had the Eaton's redevelopment project been realized to the north-east of City Hall, provision for a true urbane character would probably have occurred, so as to give new life to this part of the city. However unfortunate it was that this proposal was not carried forth, the existence of city hall square has injected that spark of vitality which is so successful in bringing people together and in regenerating continuing development such as the new hotel on its south side, presently under construction.

### The Contribution of Urbanism

It seems clear then that urban design is that part of the city planning process which deals with esthetics and which determines the order and form of the city. The esthetic characteristics of the city as an entity appear to belong to the domain of city planning as a part of its broad concern for the general physical organization of the city. These esthetic characteristics of cities must ultimately derive from a consideration of the social, economic, and physical characteristics of urban life, about which knowledge can perhaps only be acquired by some of the methods of the social sciences, and the esthetic objectives must be determined, expressed, and carried out as an integral part of the local process of city planning.

But what the designer contributes to the process of city building is not only the final form of a concept or model of the city largely given to him by others. He also contributes valuable hypotheses, to be tested by research before execution, but in any event leading to the creation of new and alternative modes of urban life, as well as urban forms, which once realized, research may be able to confirm. This is not to contend that art is experiment, but to argue that design is the only *creative* element in the city building process. The rest is analysis, projection, and implementation.

Based on the usual practice of architecture, where it is equally false, it is commonly assumed that the urban designer commences with a "program" in which the utilitarian conditions of the city are set forth, and which it is his business to reflect and resolve in the design. So notorious has this lack of relationship become

that the commonest criticism of urban designers is that they have "ignored the program." The fallacy of this approach is that design deals with potentialities, and no program is based on more than the sum of current experience. To design too close to such a program, therefore, is to condemn the new design to repeat the mistakes and limitations of the existing city. Unless we are to foreclose all prospect of forward development in our ideas of the city, and in the design of future cities, we must expect a larger contribution by designers; indeed, demand it of them, not simply at the end but at all stages of the urban design process. Fresh possibilities, offered by designers in the earliest sketches, should be received as inputs to survey and research efforts. If this is not done, the designer commences with a largely sterile analysis and sets of data that are scarcely related to the problems of design. Instead, we need dynamic design to which society can respond, and through which it can develop.<sup>5</sup>

Briefly then, the urban designer's unique contribution to the processes of city organization lies essentially in his ability to bring the abstractions of verbal planning concepts and numerical programs, as well as his own concepts, into concrete three-dimensional form and to fulfill the goals which have been established. Because the process of urban design must be interwoven with all the processes and forces of city building, the urban designer must be fully knowledgeable and experienced in all of the related activities to his field and must be an integral part of a team.

The urban designer must have the capacity to design in a three-dimensional way functional space that is not only sufficiently generalized to serve as an organizing force for the project planners, the developers, and the architects, but also sufficiently specific, dramatic, tangible, and humane to create a motivating image. The practitioner of this art must conceive of himself as the active participant in the formulation of basic policy and a contributor or practitioner in the administrative process that sets the overall basic design. He must work on program before the client begins.<sup>6</sup>

Only if we can bring together all of the interests involved at all levels of decision making to share in feedback, can we have better cities. If the disciplines of planning and urban design are not considered parts of a greater whole, then urban and social objectives are less likely to be achieved. It seems that the basis of our crisis is, again, one of communication—clients, planners, urban designers, and city dwellers—all slightly out of phase, moving and operating on different planes. If this communication problem between these closely allied disciplines, both academically and in practice, is not resolved, then the problem of the cities is not likely to be resolved.

The French term for city planning is URBANISME. It is a term whose implications bear reflection. It has the connotation of a deeper understanding of the city, as the expression of a complex society, with its history and cultural patterns, in addition to the disposition of the more physical elements. The "urbanist," or urban designer, as we have here referred to him, would be concerned with the on-going processes that influence social and demographic patterns within the city; with the needs of people and the implications upon their life styles; with the manner in which these people perceive their environments, and with the functioning of various kinds of urban institutions which are instrumental in determining the configurational framework which accommodates (or fails to accommodate) our daily needs. The "urbanist" in the European sense of the word, represents a synthesis of today's planner and urban designer, as we know them in North America.



### The Nature of the Environmental Crisis

It seems that most of the things that society produces, whether these be automobiles, roadways, buildings or even lonely parks, were created in good faith, each effort honestly motivated, but yet each completed by people acting independently of one another. This would lead us to believe that the visual chaos of our urban scene has been, in fact, the inevitable by-product of an intellectual isolation that has developed between the many and increasingly specialized components of the peculiarly North American democratic economy. Their creators were ignorant of the total needs of the community, or if they were not ignorant, they were most certainly indifferent to their responsibility. In the past, the Church, the King, the Nobles, and the wealthy Patrons made the environmental decisions for their communities. We are content that these agents no longer exist, for the most part, but this does not remove the fact that some body must accept this responsibility. To date, it has been assumed only on an extremely limited scale, as in those cases previously cited. We are indeed proud to be living in a democracy, but if these responsibilities are not met, then we cannot truly be free men. If we are to eliminate the physically dangerous, psychologically harassing, and esthetically offensive elements from our urban environment, community and governmental responsibility on an unprecedented nation-wide scale will have to occur. This can only be possible by the re-integration of the disciplines of city planning, urban design, and architecture within a framework of overall imaginative environmental planning, aided by progressive legislative machinery, and always being certain that this planning is carried on in terms of the total need.

Man cannot live by science and technology alone. Art, the stirring of the soul, is equally within the realm of human needs. The sooner this is realized and the sooner society is able to see the city within this frame of reference, the more elevating and meaningful urban life will be for us all. If not, then we shall have to content ourselves with the homogeneity of sub-urban life, totally lacking in the diversity, variety and complexity of experiences that only urban environments have been able to offer us, and with the frenzied and harassing commuter-journey from residence to place of work, upon the already saturated freeways that we have built. Only if we understand fully that the mission of separation is to subordinate serving functions of a utilitarian or mechanical nature to human ones can we proceed properly.

Functionality and efficiency must be implicit in the construction of our future urban "machines," but we must also reach out to higher goals—to those which are spiritually enriching, which delight the eye and stimulate the imagination. We need desperately to attain the highest artistic expression of those functional demands essential in all contemporary city planning. Only thus will our cities be humane. The very prominent town planner, Hans Blumenfeld, has aptly summed up the peculiar nature of our urban crisis. He says:

The American and Canadian people are faced with a dilemma. They want, and want badly, two things. They want to live in an efficient, convenient, healthy, and pleasant environment, and they want, as individuals and collectively as municipalities, to be able to make an honest dollar out of every piece of property they happen to own. The two are basically incompatible. Sooner or later they will have to decide which one is more important to them.<sup>7</sup>

### Footnotes

1. Norman E. P. Pressman, *An Urban Redevelopment Proposal for Hull, Quebec*. Master's Thesis in Urban Design, Cornwall University, 1969, unpublished.
2. John Ely Burchard, "The Limitations of Utilitarianism as a Basis for Determining Urban Joy," *Man and the Modern City*, Geen, Lowe, Walker. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963, pp. 15-16.
3. Victor Gruen, *The Heart of Our Cities*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967, p. 136.
4. John Tetlow and Anthony Goss, *Homes, Towns and Traffic*. New York, Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968, p. 191.
5. Frederick Gutheim, "Urban Space and Urban Design," *Cities and Space, The Future Use of Urban Land*, Lowdon Wingo, Jr. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, p. 127.
6. Edmund N. Bacon, "The City Image," *Man and the Modern City*, Geen, Lowe, Walker. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963, p. 31.
7. Hans Blumenfeld, "The Urban Pattern," *The Modern Metropolis*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967, p. 60.