

Framing Emergent Principles

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INTRODUCTION

If architecture is to successfully mediate the material and non material realms of life, it will be due to a profound understanding of the physical qualities of the frame it provides and the capacity of this frame to manifest perceptions and experiences. The reexamination of the qualities and forces from which architecture derives meaning is critically important in academic and practice contexts.

Spaces, sites, and cities have material and non material dimensions that impact social well being. As creative beings we produce space, speculate about sites, and create cultural fields that provide a framework for our ever emerging existence and well being. We also project and mold ourselves, our institutions, our cities, and society, in space as though in a mirror. With ideologies and "visionary" master plans we see ourselves where we are not "in an unreal virtual space that opens up behind the surface of the mirror." In these representations lies the unending struggle to locate ourselves, our existence between the "reality of spirit and the reality of matter."² In this struggle to unify the soul and body we find ourselves in a liminal existence, between here and there. This existence is sited outside of ourselves, perceptually, but emanates from our biological needs and creative imagination as though a projection between what is and what is thought.

MAPPING THE VOID - A SURVEY OF THE ARCHITECTURAL DIALECTIC

Against the backdrop of current trends toward privatization and universals based on new technology and modes of communication as exemplified by the Internet, it is generally acknowledged that the discipline of architecture must find new more adaptive and integrative methods of practice and education. The architects creative role in response to the need for more attractive, efficient cities and social concerns are major issues facing the profession.¹ Paradoxically, the discipline itself has helped limit the potential of architecture to serve society. There exist both within and outside the discipline, the surprisingly common and narrow definition of

architecture as "the art of building" in which "even buildings that are well designed are limited in their capacity to ennoble life and improve the lot of men and women."⁴ And "signature design" by some architects today beg the question; can architects be socially responsible?⁵

Examples of the need for new more humane programs that address space and culture specific issues are not hard to find in any city. For example privatized theme streets and atriums, gated communities, and even virtual villages for civic interaction on the Internet, limit the right to freedom of speech and assembly to a parallel existence, outside and somewhere else. What is outside, the public street and traditional location of civic space, has become a conduit for trash, crime, transportation, and those outcasts who are unable to buy, serve or perhaps those who are simply lost.

But architecture as a discipline can be assigned only part of the blame for these conditions. Historically, architecture has been a knowledge based craft that serves both as a "cultural discourse and frame for life."⁶ It has served as the metaphysical embodiment of shared cultural knowledge, and meaning, and has been profoundly interdisciplinary in its mediation of the material and non material realms of society.⁷ One could argue, as Manfredo Tafuri did, that perhaps through no fault of their own, architects today are merely technicians with a limited ideological role implementing the development programs of capitalism which are wholly beyond their control.⁸ And there is growing evidence that suggests that architects no longer fulfill even their technological role.

How then might the contemporary and traditional views of architecture be reconciled? How might we better understand the origin or cause of the apparent contradictions? And in what manner of practice and education can the abstract and corporeal realms of the human existence be meaningfully combined in cities today? A way of beginning to answer these important questions is to acknowledge that the ideas, theories and practices that result in the successful redefinition of the role of architecture in society, must originate from a societal and interdisciplinary frame of reference. In doing this we may perceive through our creative consciousness,⁹

intuitively and deliberately through problem solving, new and enhanced services and products of architectural urban design.

SOCIAL AND LITERARY PERSPECTIVES

The body of knowledge on the subject of the city is broad in scope. And the concerns for, and explanations of, the void between the material and non material city are as varied and dialectic as they are attributable to the disciplines from which they emerge. Sharpe and Wallock in *Visions of The Modern City*, provide an analysis of literary and arts perspectives and conclude that "the view of the city is often no less clouded within a single field of investigation."¹⁰ Yet broad commonalities have been identified. For example the focus on the modern period and the concern for the "collective and conscious decisions that have created comprehensive land use and spatial patterns...usually in pursuit of an ideal physical environment." This effort to deal with urbanization has two other important characteristics. First, in a broad social context, it has been suggested that our current modes of analysis, or paradigms, are outdated and do not account for contemporary urban spatial morphology.¹² It is clear that "over the past two centuries, the conception of the city as a physical entity has gradually yielded to one based on intangible relationships," and that in terms of city evolution we are now struggling to describe and define a decentered city with past definitions to which it does not conform.¹³ The second important characteristic is an assertion of the role of individual and collective perceptions as determinants of urban form and culture. The following expands on these two aspects of the struggle.

In *Landscapes of Power*, Sharon Zukin, a sociologist, provides a critical analysis of contemporary urban development while illuminating some of the tangible and intangible aspects of the urban landscape. She argues that the current emphasis in architecture to packaging and consumerism fits into a broader and characteristically American landscape of consumption where the competition between place and merchandising results in the "creative destruction" and gentrification of indigenous urban culture. This emphasis on consumption has caused individuals and social groups to experience qualitative changes in their personal and economic lives, their inner intellectual landscapes, as well as their material surroundings, their neighborhood places in urban landscape. Zukin sees examples of this everywhere. Previous districts or economic uses such as the harbor, the marketplace, or the factory are converted to offer the image of an earlier identity or locality combining shopping with historic tourism in an apparently authentic suspension of time between the present and the past. And as is customary in these privatized environments, only certain predetermined "public" activities are permitted.¹⁴

In *The Experience of Place*, Tony Hiss provides examples of the struggle to shift the way we think about our surroundings in order to change the way we culturally deal with them.

He described the common effort within a variety of disciplines to protect, maintain and enhance the experience of space as an emerging "science of place." Additionally, Hiss argues that through "simultaneous perception" humans may become better care takers of their natural and cultural habitats. If we know more about where we live, through an awareness of immediate and far away surroundings, we will understand its value and impact upon our well being. This will enable us as a species to act responsibly to sustain ourselves culturally and economically while safe guarding the natural environment.¹⁵

Likewise, James Kunstler in *The Geography of Nowhere*, echoes Louis Murnford's writing much early in this century. Mumford was concerned about new technologies and their potential to destroy the traditions of civic life. He discussed the need for a "paradigm shift" in American society in order to address the new forces of technology. Identifying problems today that Mumford predicted so long ago, Kunstler argues that if enough people perceive and agree upon the connection between the demise of the public realm and the breakdown in public safety, their will be a dramatic change or shift in the way we as a society deal with public places and public safety.¹⁶ Together Kunstler, Hiss, and Zukin are representative examples of a broad effort to describe and define contemporary urban space, and to understand the perceptions that guide the material and non material aspects of human settlement and social well being. The preliminary result of this effort suggest the need for greater connectedness and intimacy with the places we inhabit. Also that there are fundamental differences between the traditional places of inhabitation and those of today. This is due to a pervasive integration of technology with every day life, an overwhelming emphasis on production and consumption, and narrowly defined professions stemming from increased specialization. And finally there is a common assertion in the literature that human perception plays a mediating role between ideology and the physical environment.

FRAMING EMERGENT PRINCIPLES

The remainder of this paper focuses on the role of perception as a determinate of urban spatial structure. This role is examined as it relates to three environmental phenomena; space, site and the city. In the following I also identify three emergent principles that stem from the literature. These principles are representative of an emerging perceptual framework bringing together the material and non material realms of urban culture. My hypothesis is that the **scales** and **principles** may be useful as fragments of an evolving interdisciplinary theory of urban design.

Scale - Principle

Space - Space Production

"To change life-style," "to change society," theses phrases mean nothing if there is no production of an appropriated space...Today, the analysis of production

shows that we have passed from the *production of things in space* to the *production of space itself*.¹⁷

In his assessment, Henri Lefebvre introduced the first emergent principle presented here. It is summarized as follows. *Space is a social commodity that may be produced to improve ourselves and society.* Space then, based on the perception that it is a social product, is regarded as an extension of social and cultural value having material and non material components. A "soup kitchen" or a "shelter" for the homeless are basic examples of spaces that are produced to respond to a phenomena of homelessness in society. They spaces represent a system of underlying social values that provide the non material conceptual framework for their production. These spaces are also material in that they can be occupied, touched, and used in a way that provides amenities that immediately and directly sustains and improves the lives of their users.

Space is also produced for the purpose of representing thought and to facilitate certain kinds of non material cognitive experiences, perceptions, and mental well being. Temples are produced for the purpose of representing and fostering spiritual thought, and religious well being. Performing arts halls and museums are produced for cultural well being. These spaces are not required for biological sustenance but are needed for a more abstract, intellectual, and imaginative purpose, mental sustenance.

Streets, sidewalks and community parks, which are common elements of city infrastructure, are also produced to improve peoples lives materially and non materially. They make the city useable, and livable by providing the paths and spaces with which we literally travel through urban life both functionally and emotionally. The spaces that surround these paths and spaces impact our sense of personal and civic well being. Collectively and physically we produce these spaces and, by design or not, they impact our basic well being both physically and mentally.

Studies show that observable urban spatial conditions are likely to affect human behavior. Spaces characterized by signs of neglect and social disorder, such as broken windows and drunken panhandlers, are likely to cause people to abandon them by using these spaces less frequently and in less caring ways. This abandonment of the public domain is associated with a breakdown in the informal rules of civil conduct.¹⁸

Spatial conditions also affect peoples actions by influencing what they think, and what they perceive to be real. Studies show that the perception of crime on street corners and other abandoned spaces that are avoided due to fear, is likely to be higher than actual crime in that location. This in turn causes further avoidance or abandonment of these public areas.¹⁹ These studies indicate that physical evidence of abandonment or disorder leads to and reinforces further abandonment and disorder. Stemming from this it is possible to see how security design measures such as gating a community, or privatizing public space, are evidence that

these spaces must *not* be safe, otherwise, the measures would not be needed. Yet these measures are also likely to be taken as evidence that, due to lack of alternatives, similar measures are needed in adjacent or similar spaces.

Humans produce space mentally and subjectively as well. "Subjective space" is a function of cognitive processes, it exist imaginatively in the mind's eye. The subjective component of space is linked to human consciousness and cognition over some perceivable time period. Based on the assumption that space is infinitely divisible, Henri Bergeson reasoned that a person can consciously distinguish or perceive only a minimum number of increments, or divisions, of space. He called these perceivable divisions "intervals." In perceiving these intervals of space the mind sums up an infinitely more diluted existence into more differentiated intensified moments of consciousness.²⁰ These moments are location and consciousness specific. They are embellished by our senses, which, respond to physical matter such as the course texture of a brick wall, the reflective qualities of a transparent windowpane, or a bashed and graffiti marked door.

Matter not only embellishes these moments of consciousness, but can also cause them. For example the sensual qualities of a space can cause a person to become more aware of their immediate surroundings, and to have identifiable feelings about the space they occupy. The dual nature of the means by which these moments are produced, by cognitive processes or by the physical senses, represents a perceptual threshold offering a direct connection between the material and the non material realms of human consciousness.

A final distinction here relates to the conscious production of space based on individual perception and cognition, as opposed to the production of space based on our conscience, what is thought to be right or wrong. For example, in Bergeson's analysis of space emphasis is placed upon the mental production of space or the mental reading of space as a function of individual cognition. He calls attention to the role of individual cognitive perceptions, that are in effect virtual summations of the actual and infinitely more detailed space, as determinant in the human understanding of the physical environment. In the case of Lefebvre, emphasis is placed upon the production of space as a empirical and physical indicator of social value. Regardless of the intent or manner in which a physical environment is produced, either non materially by mental consciousness producing an awareness in the minds eye or physically as a product of ideology or social framework, the environment is ultimately processed and interpreted by the human intellect. This processing results in the intellectual production of space which then influences our actions in space.

The making of space then is a dialectic exercise. We approach it with a "conceptual apparatus, the capitol equipment of our intellect."²¹ And moving through it like the restless analyst in the *American Scene* by Henri James, our experience of space is shaped by imagination. We produce it, and then, in turn, it impacts our individual and collective well being materially and non materially.

Site - Site Speculation

In its intimate association with space, a site within the city also has dialectic and perceptual dimensions. This relationship provides the basis for the second of three emergent principles described in this paper. This principle is summarized as follows. *A site locates and contributes to the production and consumption of space as "both the geographical site of action and the social possibility for action."*²²

Empty city lots and condemned property provide tangible evidence of the site speculation principle. Most cities are painfully aware of the public speculation that occurs in newspaper articles and neighborhood meetings about these sites. These *site speculations* are expressions of individual and collective thought and action. A site materially frames and gives physical presence to speculative thinking regarding community development. This speculation has material and non material themes.

Conflicts over actual property development often occur between business and investment groups, neighborhood residents, and community development corporations that focus on low income. Studies indicate that in many neighborhoods, the dividing line in the speculation about the appropriate use or physical development of property often falls between those who rent housing and those who own property. In essence this speculation is about the inherent ideological conflict between a public conscience, and private development rights. These conflicts focus on differences between what is perceived to be right, culturally and socially, and what is perceived to be right economically.²³

A national movement toward advocacy or activism art, has served as a perceptual tool to raise social awareness and most importantly, tantalize our conscience about sites and their relation to people. For example Martha Rosler presented an evocative program in New York City utilizing artists, art installations and interdisciplinary public forums to make social and political inquiries into site specific topics such as community, housing, homelessness, and urban planning. Decrying the wholesale erasure of working and lower class neighborhoods, and "percent for art" "beautification" projects such as in Battery Park City in Manhattan, she asked for a reconsideration and reconception of the city. Through creative documentation of the "underreported, underdescribed, multidetermined conditions producing simple results: homelessness and sadly inadequate housing" she speculated that a "level of mediation can exist between those who experience a situation and those who view it."²⁴ Martha Rosler's effort to blur the distinction between the viewer and the viewed, between here and there, between the abstract gallery installation and the material world outside, is an exercise in liminality if not an advocacy for the production of humane space.

Sites are also contested as a place of creative intervention among disciplines. For example Rosalind Krauss, in "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," illuminates the potential for a site to be a place of options and possible combinations

relating to perception and the creative manipulation of sites, as opposed to the "placeless and largely self referential" sculptural objects stemming from modernist rules limiting the creative manipulation of a site. According to Krauss, by altering the structure of the diagrammatic relationship between architecture, sculpture, and landscape, such that the structure of the relationship enables creative combinations of each, a corresponding change occurs in the potential to reconfigure the structure of experience in space, and creative design in space. Krauss sees the site constructions, site markings and axiomatic structures of Mary Miss, Robert Smithson and Richard Serra as evidence of this expanded perceptual field within which the artist may now create.²⁵

Both Krauss and Rossler provide artistic and conceptually relevant examples of the Site Speculation principle. Krauss highlights the benefits of disciplinary boundary crossing, and the importance of perception in enabling artists to cross over into other fields in their creative efforts. Project Row Houses started by artist Rick Low in Houston's Third Ward neighborhood, is a recent example of artists creating in this expanded frame of reference. Like Rossler's effort, Project Row Houses combines community service with social and cultural awareness, and the arts. This project is notable because it has, with the assistance of local businesses, government, and other organizations including the National Endowment for the Arts, been successful in actually transforming a two block site of abandoned and blighted row houses into interactive spaces for black artists, as well as children and adult community education programs including math, neighborhood history, and infant care.

City - Cultural Field

The third and final principle to be described is as follows. *A city is a cultural field of regional presence's and forces in various stages of beginning and ending.* A cultural field is comprised of natural and cultural realms traces of evolution that are an integral part of the regional landscape. The decentered and illegible character of modern cities and the relation among them, challenges traditional notions of the city and its embodiment of place. It is a condition reflected in contemporary literature and as writers explore its deep structure and entropy, the spaces and processes of the contemporary city seem to elude description.²⁶ Perhaps, it is the city's elusiveness and indeterminacy that make it so compelling.

Referring to the early American Midwest, J.B. Jackson described the cultural geography and isolation of individuals created by the platting of the west. "Cabins and houses were hidden from one another by two miles or more of forest...the traditional points of orientation and reassurance-church steeple, tavern clustering of houses, passerby-did not exist."²⁷ This created a decentered Cartesian patchwork of relations, and an abstract field of space ordering the lives of those who came to occupy the territory.

The abstract spatial ordering of the grid has come to dominate both inner cities and the continental U.S. land-

scape of cities, which, similar to the early cabins and houses of the Midwest, extend isolated yet repetitiously across the land. Conditions today challenge traditional notions about the city and country as being separate entities, and provide evidence of the existence of an urban field.²⁸ More recently natural landscapes are perceived as isolated presence's in the expansive cultural matrix of cities. The matrix is comprised of regional and national conduits and repositories for the movement of people, resources, and storage. And many observable phenomena in the cultural field are reminders of a lack of collective stewardship for our social well being and for the well being of the natural environment.

This has resulted in an effort to increase the awareness of the responsibility for the natural and cultural environments in which we live. For example in "The Trouble With Nature," William Cronin argued that we "need to discover a middle ground in which all these things, from the city to wilderness, can somehow be encompassed in the word 'home.'" Cronin sees this as an issue of perception, and is critical of the way we as a culture tend to think about ourselves in relation to nature. His thesis is that what remains of the American wilderness has taken on mythic meaning in the minds of "urban folk." It has come to symbolize a romanticism for the historic American frontier and the freedom it once embodied. Now, we are essentially an urban population pretending that our real home is in the wild country where we drive on weekends and on vacations. In imagining that our real home, or model for life, is some where else "we forgive ourselves for the homes that we actually inhabit."²⁹

The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, has adopted a "things-regionalism," and "people-regionalism" philosophy based upon the interconnectedness material and non material resources of cities and counties. Regional things are public works such as water and sewer facilities, airports, roads, and mass transit. And people regionalism has to do with addressing the social problem of inner city poverty, racial segregation, crime, and isolation.³⁰ Some regions have demonstrated a greater perception of the benefits and consequences of this relationship than others. For example the Twin Cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, Montgomery County, Maryland, and Portland, Oregon's innovative regional growth management, housing initiatives to create "fair share" low to moderate income housing in inner city neighborhoods, and combat the sprawling subdivision of farm land, are viewed as good examples of creating regional diversity, balance, and stability."

Diverging strategies for attaining regional goals are at the core of a long political debate relating to inner city conditions. Preferences regarding inner city neighborhood social services such as housing, safety, education, and infant care rather than neighborhood revitalization through "beautification" and economic development, and perceptions about poverty have played a key role in this debate. Many think that a long line of attempts to address poverty in inner cities,

beginning with Urban Renewal (1949), and Community Action Programs (1964), leading to Enterprise Zones (1980), and Empowerment Zones (1993), has failed. This has left many policy makers and their constituencies skeptical about the places at the historic core of regional demographic geography.³²

But the reason that inner cities will probably continue to be a focus of national and regional concern also has to do with perceptions. Neighborhood revitalization provides tangible bricks and mortar evidence of positive change that can be visited, photographed, and promoted as proof that things are improving and will get even better. Thus physical transformations of blighted environments are appealing to a variety of key players in the highly political debate about the well being of cities and the people who live in them.

Politicians representing geographical areas with largely metropolitan constituencies derive political benefits from stimulating revitalization and large scale capitol improvements such as highways, civic centers, and government complexes in their communities. Philanthropic foundations, business groups and grass roots community organizations also share a common interest in inner city revitalization. New developments combined with street beautification create an image of positive economic and cultural change, and the construction of low income housing, festive retail markets, and pedestrian street scapes provide tangible evidence that they have made a difference in their communities.

Since the 1960's United States Presidents have found it politically expedient to promote bottom up grass roots strategies to inner city problems. This is partly due to high cost of implementing big government or bureaucratic programs, and the difficulty of navigating congressional approvals for such plans." Yet the limited results of these alliance can be readily observed. Each interest group tends to facilitate the production of isolated and primarily single use developments that, even when located next to one another, often do not make connections with an existing place or to each other. For example a housing development may provide a family with an apartment, but other services, needs, and amenities such as neighborhood safety, education, infant care, grocery markets, library, or park spaces that make living in that apartment suitable both physically and socially, are typically left out of the formula. This has had the peculiar result of making life in the downtown like life in the suburb. Access to basic amenities is not practical without a car. The general belief that most attempts to improve inner city conditions ultimately fail has been attributed to an inability to perceive and act upon this fundamental flaw. This has resulted in a flight from and abandonment of the city.

CONCLUSION AND WORKING HYPOTHESIS

Perceptions about space, sites and the city make a difference in the way we interact with the world around us materially and non materially. The long term economic and social costs

of not doing more to facilitate humane well being, to address a breakdown in social conduct and diminished emotional and physical health attributable to environmental factors, make it impractical to respond to these problems with outmoded principles and practices. Due to the persuasiveness of new technologies, it is unlikely that we will find our future by simply using paradigms that stem from a previous time in history. Ambiguity and confusion regarding the cultural transformation of our environments today can be overcome by establishing a framework of shared needs and principles based on the perceptions and conditions that we face today.

All professions, educators, politicians, community organizations, clients, and regulatory bodies play a direct or indirect role in the transformation of the physical environment, and influence individual and community well being. The product of the collaborations among these groups impact a larger community of people. A theoretical model based on emergent principles, may help us to better understand our individual and collective role as mediators and creative interpreters. Ultimately this model, or a similar model, may facilitate the production of space, speculation about sites, and the cultural field as both a means of perception and a means of material and non material well being.

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