

Mathematics of the Ideal Roadtrip

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[We Europeans] shall never enjoy the same freedom—not the formal freedom we take for granted, but the concrete, flexible, functional, active freedom we see at work in American institutions and in the head of each citizen. Our conception of freedom will never be able to rival their spatial, mobile conception, which derives from the fact that at a certain point they freed themselves from [a] historical centrality.

- Jean Baudrillard, from the roadtrip classic *America'*

On U.S. Highway 93, which runs through the Flathead Valley from British Columbia to Missoula and on south eventually to Arizona, lies the city of Kalispell, Montana. Save for its spectacular mountain setting, this small city might be mistaken for any typical American place, being formed by two intersecting highways and orthogonally gridded, with streets numbered north to south and avenues east to west. Through Kalispell, U.S. 93 becomes the city's Main Street. On its south end, Main Street is forced around a plot in the middle of the roadway, the site of the Flathead

County Courthouse. This physical fact would be unremarkable—the building being neither particularly handsome nor its siting unusual—except for the curious experience of driving around it. One can sense clearly, even without benefit of a map, that the Courthouse occupies the singular instance in the entire city grid where the regulation of order, of movement, was denied for another public domain; the symbolic center of regional government.

Certainly the reading intended at Kalispell is that of the "noble city," of a citizenry made virtuous by the centrality of government. And yet traveling around this plot, full with its civil aspirations of both place and polity, remains a distinctly troublesome act, not merely in the discomfort of following short curves in a road that by rights should be straight, but with the nagging fact of that particularly American feeling—*by rights it should be straight*.

Such a thought might be dismissed as anti-authoritarian American populism if it were not for the suspicion that it is exactly such populism the Courthouse siting seems to be resisting. After all, broad avenues topped with courthouses

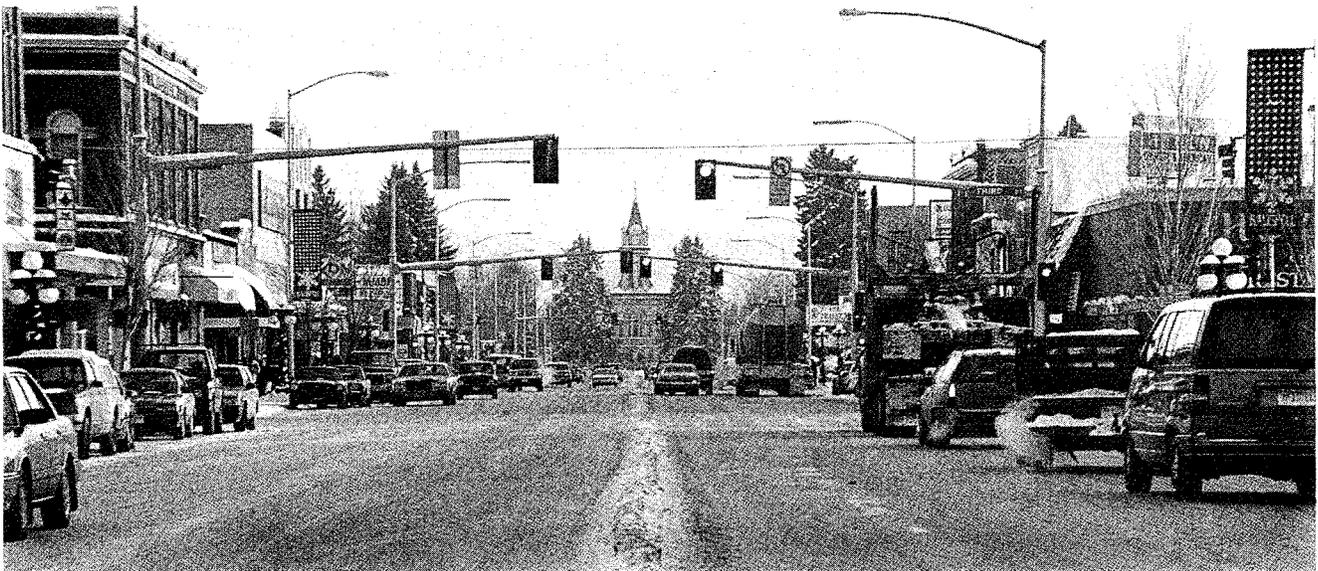


Fig. 1. Main Street in Kalispell, Montana, with axial view toward the Flathead County Courthouse. [Photo: Karen Nichols]

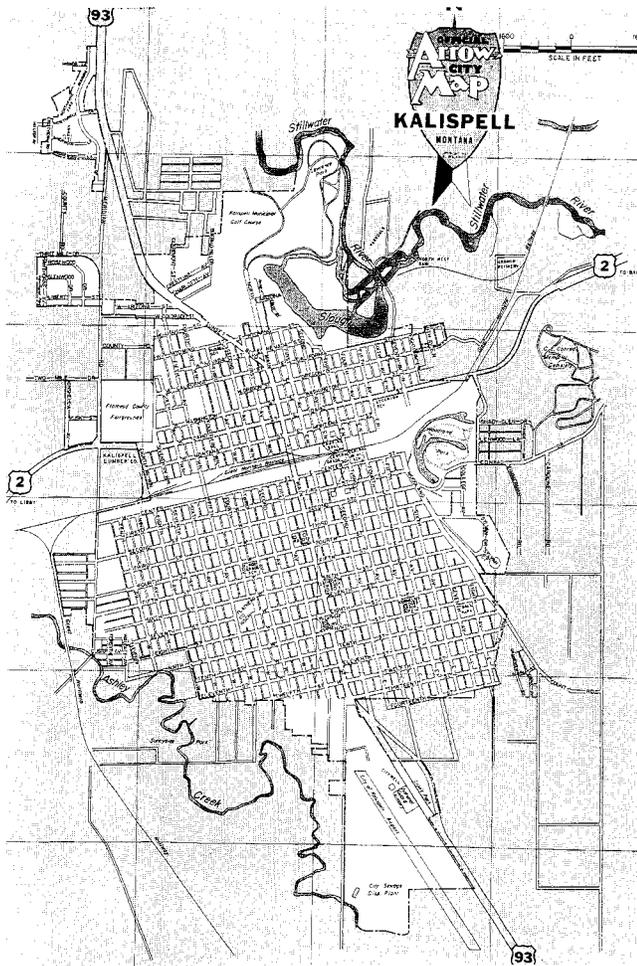


Fig. 2. City grid of Kalispell, with its Courthouse located in the middle of Main Street. [Arrow Map]

are more Haussmann than Everyman. But the concern may be less a question of unwarranted authority than one of deference to an outside tradition. It appears that the Courthouse's placement—a site deviation of a mere 150 feet from the grid in which it might have easily been built—is construed to be a civil act of profound consequence. The clear suggestion is that the grid itself does not contain this political necessity; that the Courthouse site, as a displacement of both the ordered field and of movement through it, is seen to exhibit some ideal civility that its surrounds apparently lack.

The denial of movement for the institution of a traditional center strikes at the heart of the American social compact. It is this assault put to the possibility of indigenous form which makes Kalispell and places like it so disconcerting, both to the citizen and the enlightened critic. Baudrillard makes the point that it is exactly such urban civil traditions which have been superseded by the American project; a "historical centrality" overcome by the spatial and mobile conception of American freedom. If Baudrillard offers reason for the anxiety caused by Kalispell's formal nature, then we have right to wonder about the recurring attempts to institute a

civil order in America through this Trojan Horse of historic form.

Should this challenge to an indigenous American civil form go unquestioned? Confronted with the rapid academic and legislative legitimization of postmodern urban strategies, Americans might do better by revisiting those who have offered criticism of these appropriated traditions. Frank Lloyd Wright made a career out of it (most notably with Broadacre City), a practice largely indebted to the eloquent plea of Horatio Greenough nearly a century before: "The want of an illustrious ancestry may be compensated, filly compensated; but the purloining of the coat-of-arms of a defunct family is intolerable."²² Perhaps the issue is not that Americans haven't thought it incorrect to appropriate the forms of history—certainly, thinkers have long offered arguments to the contrary. But there still appears to be a lack of faith in the possibility of a commensurate democratic order outside of this history and its aristocratic ideals. This is indeed a problem. Against the backdrop of history's great intellectual and artistic achievements, it is not certain whether we might produce comparable successes which exemplify a society of equality.'

To what then can a truly American ideal aspire? The lesson from Kalispell is that the movement expected within the American landscape instills some possibility toward giving form to the collective. The functions of the road which manifest this notion—one could suggest its "mathematics"—give reason to suspect imposed hierarchy, precisely because the road's nature, its equanimity, diversity, and individuality, is seen counterpoised to such traditions. The search for the proper American collective begins with the fact of movement.

THE INDIVIDUAL

Movement was an undertaking begun long before the actual transformation of the American continent. But its earliest manifestation was intellectual, not physical.

The political philosophies of the Enlightenment, which had become pregnant with the possibility of an Arcadian world of complete social reorganization, were persistently thwarted by entrenched western governments. Bound from above, Europe was a place that required political and ideological revolution; Arcadia was this, but moreover a moral revolution as well. Such a utopian project, impossible from within the world it was designed to escape, was in search for entirely new ground on which to birth and develop.

It is this "fantasy of emigration"²⁴ that from the very beginning defined America. More than the simple physical leap from the Old world to the New, this movement, through the free act of abandoning the historic socio-political structure, brought the individual to new light. Movement became the construct by which the newly discerned citizen was gleaned from sovereign order. But more importantly, emigration materialized the individual in space and the new

body politic that this dramatic departure could define.

Movement has become the very lore of American life, from the Clipper ship, the DC-3, the '57 Chevy, to the conquest of space. America's stories are those told through windshields: Steinbeck, Pirsig and Kerouac all searched for America on its roads, as did those from the old culture whose perceptions have proved insightful here—Baudrillard's late twentieth-century roadtrip mirrored Alexis de Tocqueville's original tour in the early nineteenth-century. Reyner Banham put his finger to it saying, "like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original."⁵ Much of this necessity for first-hand experience is legacy to the formal organization of the land. It is nearly inconceivable that the great American enterprise of movement would ever have been as intense or productive without the very shape of the landscape—the fact of the grid.

The institution of the continental grid, the six-square-mile township divisions outlined in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, was a dramatic invention of the young democracy, even though colored by the dissension and misjudgments one would expect from an undertaking so radically unproven.⁶ But of larger interest here is the sympathy of the idea to the intrinsic American condition. Thomas Jefferson defended the grid as an assurance that "as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land," and its application was designed as a formal demonstration of that belief. The grid also had the conceptual advantage of providing—in a single legislative idea—the spatial delineation of the entire conti-

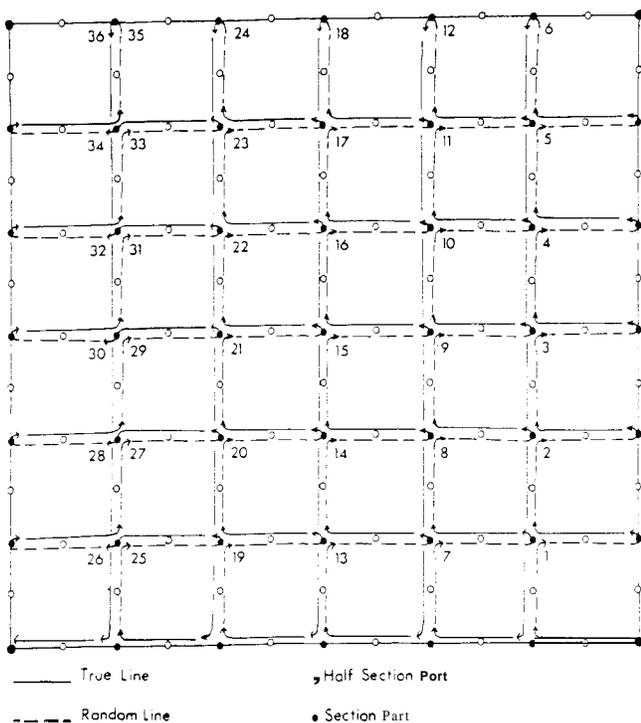


Fig. 3. Route followed by surveyors when subdividing a township into sections. [From Hildegard Binder Johnson, *Order upon the Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 77.]

nent, incorporating lands both urban and rural, undeveloped and never intended for development.⁸ In that sense, the grid system contained within itself the complete social integration of place, and the landscape was thus marked with equality's fundamental sign; a social and spatial congruency as in the Buddhist mandala, or the South American Jesuit villages ordered around the Cross.⁹

The grid has always been about fluidity and movement, rather than place or centrality. Even the surveyor's graceful path of subdividing a township was evidence of this. But nothing could be more illustrative than the fact that towns through the grid were located abstractly every sixth square mile, as a consequence of the system of calibration.¹⁰ This was a conscious attempt to objectify the landscape such that the whole existed as agency for the individual. In this schema, one would not be able to find any reference to center, because the basic unit of land was produced through the orthogonal system and its disseminating network of movement."

It is the grid's utter denial of center which explains its criticism through comparisons with traditional urban types. As a pure formalist exercise, theorists have always found it both amazingly cogent and maddeningly naive. It is this apparent "obviousness" that has made the grid a sort of magic talisman for democracy; its emblematic simplicity reduced to an abstraction of orthographics. But it is not this type of categorization that best suits the political reality, in fact quite the opposite. If movement is, as suggested, the concretized form which describes and maintains the individual in the collective American psyche, the grid is then the very effort, the essence, the "place" of equality, the only "center" that may be realized. And in this, it is not symbol so much as it is work.

This idea of the grid's work, as both noun and verb, brings forth issues that are more active than simply demonstrative. The economy of the grid, the construction of property rights, personal liberties and jurisprudence are not only manifestations of societal norms, but they also act as methods; procedures which allow for the maintenance of these utopic ideals. Both manifestation and method are inherently necessary for the exemplification of the individual, and together with that individual define the spatial construct of the democratic collective. In this field of democracy, the citizenry is identified and enabled by these actions it generates: the image of collectivity, its manifestation, and the fact, the method, of its making.

This is a particularly important issue in understanding the place of America. Unlike the metaphorical grounding of perspectival space—where the citizenry becomes a pawn in a transcendent order which exceeds them—the mutuality inherent to the operation of the grid is real reciprocity in real time, without the mediating influence of either outside authority or representation. It is, in effect, a physical achievement of equality. This too is the craft of the Constitution; a social pact not by egalitarian imposition, but through the fact that all are equal from the outset. A

democracy attendant with its equality is thus both manifestation and method, living within a utopian ideal while at the same time enabling its very possibility.

Many would attribute this startling product of the American system to the achievement of individual freedom. Certainly Tocqueville employed this analysis. Yet, as Jefferson maintained throughout his life, the great threat to free societies was their inherent tendency toward individual excess at the expense of the common good. Tocqueville spent a good deal of his energy assessing what he called "individualism," which "at first only dawns the spring of public virtues, but in the long run it attacks and destroys all the others too and finally merges in egoism."¹² It is this excess, this "Darwinian" aspect of the idea of freedom, that was described as the single most dangerous problem of democracies. Individualism remains a issue that, despite the brilliant Constitutional development of balances to keep it in check, no doubt still exists in various disturbing forms in contemporary America, as it always has to greater or lesser degrees. And despite the recent wholesale repudiation of Marxism, we cannot ignore the great political struggles that have been borne world-wide to overcome the ideologic excesses of both capital and individual freedom.

It is this same excess of American formal freedom that Peter Blake denounced in his categorical dismissal of New Orleans' Canal Street compared to what he considered the

lost possibilities of Jefferson's lawn at the University of Virginia. In the face of Blake's assertion that Canal Street was banal and completely without civil character,¹³ Robert Venturi was eventually to defend the natural condition of Main Street by quipping that it was instead "almost all right."¹⁴ In large part, the present argument might be represented by these two American forms; the compelling image of new world order proposed at Charlottesville and the functional pragmatic of street life in New Orleans. But neither alone is the proper paradigm. Instead, it might indeed be the "almost all right"—the middle ground between the pleas of Blake and Venturi—that offers fertile ground; not in the Venturian sense, that Main Street would be all right if only architects had reordered its present peculiarities, but in the possibility that the civil ideal may yet be latent in forms of the commonplace.

We begin to see that both of the extreme conditions—historic hierarchy and pure excessive freedom—thrive only by subjugating their systems to their own very particular requirements. It is instead the operation of the "temperate between" which might appear more proper as an indigenous system realizing that the natural American "place" must be between these two poles; its manifestation, its things and its people, exist as indivisible with the method which both generates and defends them. This give and take between being liberated and producing liberty is the proper and necessary project of equality.

THE OBJECT AND THE GRID

The question is, as it perhaps has always been, how does society maintain its formal condition of equality?

America appears to provide a particularly rich opportunity for its social order to be exhibited through form. We are taught to believe that this has always been the case; that form "tells" us a collective history—rarily through symbol, formal evolution, and all explained by criticism and contemporaneous events. This is the methodological essence of architectural history. But the definition of this process is recognized by contemporary theories as highly suspect. Its primary fault lies in the fact that such history is produced by interpretation, and subsequently cannot contain its own structural subjectivity.¹⁵ History's defense is to denigrate form's ambiguity and put its own procedural truth above and beyond the objects to which it lays claim. The result is form being "prostituted" by history making, and in the brothel of typology, style and representation, form can not and does not have any truly autonomous reality.

In distinction, the American ideal of democracy *necessitates* form; not to define the society through a visuality or a history, but as physical means and ends for its very existence. This is revealed through the American themes of movement and equality. Movement is a construct of three dimensions and time, while equality is a process of coextensive reciprocity. Both of these operations are questions of space, and so, ultimately, of objective form. Mindful of the requirement to

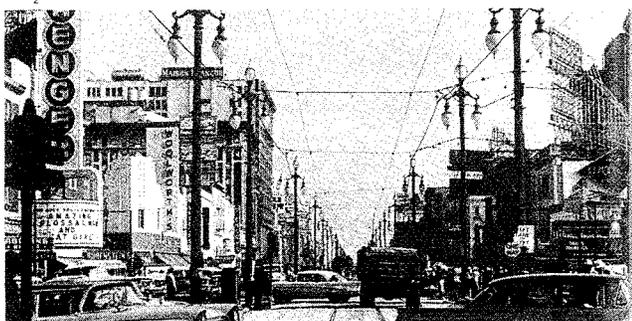
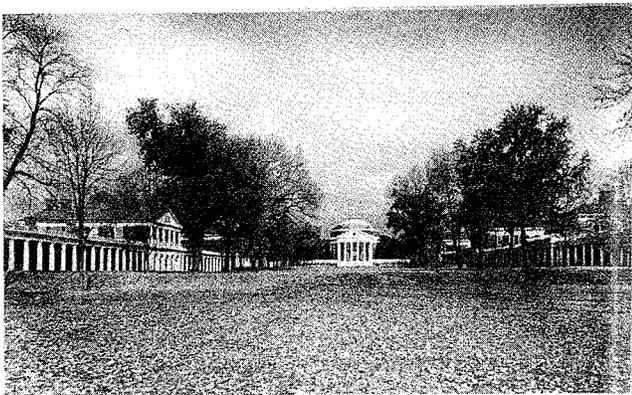


Fig. 4. Peter Blake's comparison of the University of Virginia lawn and Canal Street in New Orleans. [Photos: UVA by George Csema. Canal Street by Wallace Litwin. From Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard: The planned deterioration of America's landscape* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1979), p. 48.]

both make visible the indigenous social order (manifestation) and act as its system of production (method), it is the *necessity of form that maintains the work of this equality*. Form as evidenced by the work of America becomes a maintenance of its ideological basis as well as its proof. Such plurality could not be more distant from the historic reading of form.

It is in the ensuing search for form sympathetic to the ideal of equality that we must define those objects and processes which deny this democratic work of maintenance. But such conclusions are better seen through a direct inquiry into form, into architecture. These two paradigms of form—historic subjectivity and American objectivity—ight be illuminated by an examination of architecture within that demilitarized zone between the old world of history and the new one of modern democracy, New York City.

At the center of this question between history and equality is the comparison of two notable Manhattan landmarks, both sited on its "Main Street"—Fifth Avenue—and suggested as culturally important vehicles for American formal invention, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Rockefeller Center. The contrast between these forms is defined by two disparate conditions; Rockefeller as the "center in the grid," and the Guggenheim as the "thing illuminating the grid."

Comparatively, Rockefeller Center exists less in its "thingness" or "objectness" and more in terms of its delineation of a public space, the famed lower plaza fronting the RCA (now GE) Tower. The entire building project has become known by this trademark feature, one defined by most as memorably American. But, beyond its site and the gigantic systems of engineering and economics necessary for its realization, the formal aspects of the complex come clearly from a historic tradition of centered public spaces. Indeed, the building massing and detailing—its setbacks, materials, and art program—defer thoroughly to the nature of the plaza space which is defined by them. Even a private street was cut through the New York grid and aimed at the

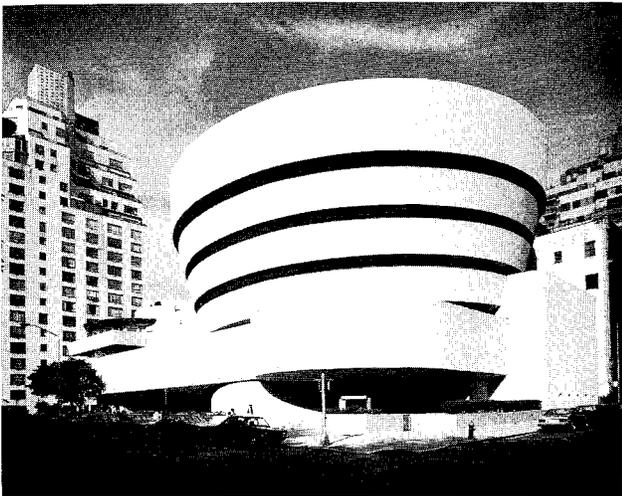


Fig. 5. Lower plaza of Rockefeller Center, with view toward the RCA Building. [Photo: Courtesy of the Rockefeller Center Group]

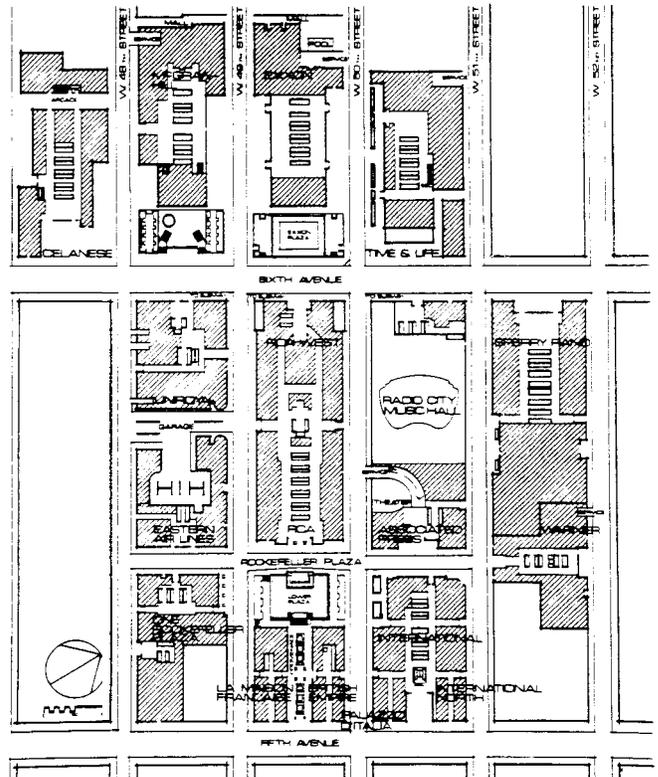


Fig. 6. Site plan of Rockefeller Center. [Drawing: Nancy Jane Ruddy. From Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Rockefeller Center* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 4.]

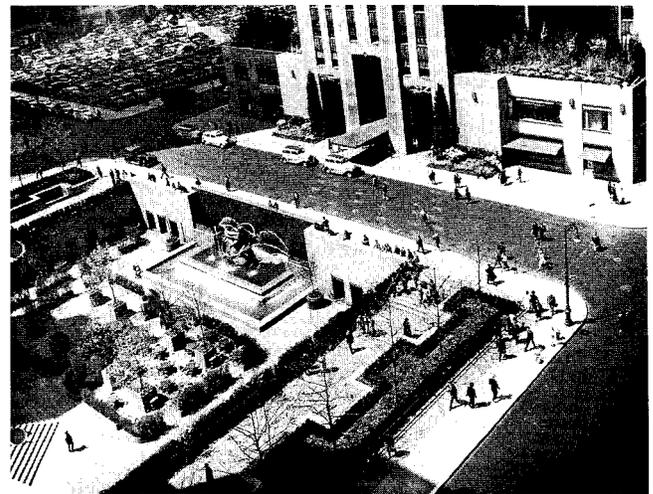


Fig. 7. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from Fifth Avenue, with context of apartment blocks. [Photo: David Heald, courtesy of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum]

plaza to further illustrate its centrality (in a move equal to, but the inverse of, the Courthouse at Kalispell).

The Guggenheim by such standards is clearly found wanting, which is exactly how it has always been criticized as a piece of urbanism. Indifferent to the street and its context, by the rules of historiographic analysis its spiral stands aloof and unconversant. Yet through its comparisons of difference, the Museum both illuminates the structural

form which allows for its "objectness"—the grid of Manhattan—as well as encourages its determinant reciprocity with the buildings around it. That is to say its aspects of individuality, or realizing a "thingness" within the grid, is the process by which it maintains the very same individuality in its neighbors. This operation is evident nearby: no one can now deny the uniqueness of the plain apartment blocks behind the Guggenheim, for it was the Museum building which gave them a reality as themselves they had not had until its construction.¹⁶

The normative critique would argue, of course, that it was Rockefeller Center which best represented the fullness of form within the grid. Orthographically detailed from the pedestrian, to the street, to the very skyline of Manhattan, its skillful manipulation of scales speaks to every possible analytical reading. Subsumed by this evaluation, subsequent additions to the Rockefeller complex were burdened with the task of repeating its analytical successes, rather than pursuing the more individual possibilities inherent to the grid (the trite plazas at the feet of both the McGraw-Hill and Exxon Towers are heirs to this fault). The Museum building, on the contrary, presumes no such universalist *parti*. One would never expect to see another "Guggenheim" aped somewhere down the Avenue, because it speaks not to a reusable formal language, but instead to the real operation of individuality within the larger American schema.

Of course, the argument leveled against objects like the Guggenheim is the claim of terror that a city of architectural individuality would be to people; without order, semblance of hierarchy, or a vision of the collective. History contends that situations of illuminated individuality are "placeless," that they exhibit nothing of the reductive possibility of either judgment or analysis, that they, in fact, become interchangeable. Andre Corboz notes that such critiques are inclined to believe Americans "would as readily number their cities ... as they do their streets." But these arguments fail to

differentiate between their deceitful dismissal of all formal individuality, and the appropriate criticism of excess in places like Houston and Denver, or the suburban vapidness of Orange County in California. These instances are far beyond the reciprocal relationship of the properly manifest "thing in the grid," and must be seen for what they are. The agency of the grid remains, as it always must, but objects within these oft-cited examples exist only as the collusive economies of capital, development, and tax law will allow. There is nothing of the play of object and system, no suggestion that these places maintain any formal equality. Giving nothing back to the grid, they become the bad objects of a misdirected egoism.

THE STREET

It is the reciprocal possibility of form and place, object and grid, which appears most applicable in America, a possibility which is neither Houston nor History. Objecthood is the unique component of the process: it is the maintenance of equality among individuals and the form necessary to accomplish that fact which in essence *produces democracy*. We can observe such effect from objects which exhibit a particularly American urbanism outside that of tradition, in the manner of architectures like the Guggenheim, as well as from the problematic situations which deny those instances, the Kalispells which rely on the centering operation of history. It is the manifest equality promised in the first case, and the question of unwarranted hierarchy in the second, which tell us that it is through the reciprocities of objecthood that the lessons of democracy are told.

Moreover, it is the construct of movement that makes such objects both visible and probable. The individuality of objects is heir to the formal possibilities of the grid, and it is the delineation of this orthogonality—its mathematics—which in turn elucidates the ideal of the road in American



Fig. 8. Main Street in Santa Monica, California. Edgemar, by Frank O. Gehry and Associates, is on the left. [Photo by the author]

placemaking. Movement is both parent and progeny in the process of **making** equality into form.

This is the task of many honest American civil conditions, but none more evocative or telling than that of the street. The condition of the street is subject to both the legislative process of order, the irreducible aspect of the grid, and the public desire for the display of its inherent individuality. By fronting objects on the edge of a collective movement system — which both defines the operation of the individual forms and their very possibility — the street brings forth the essence of a reciprocal relationship of public life, individual liberty, equality which allows for its maintenance, and the formal aspects of an architecture which demonstrate the system as both achieved and becoming.

We can not lose sight of the fact that this American civil ideal is **difficult** in the face of tradition. If predisposed to history, Main Street is a myth like that of most fairy tales.¹⁸ This handicap of interpretation is also why Kalispell looms ever larger. The imperative of history is widely entrenched, and its abilities to satisfy the intellectualization of space without absorbing its true indigenous potential is difficult to battle. But sustaining the work of an architecture which supports the practical ideals of democratic worth and dignity remains the only real way to manifest the idea of **America**.¹⁹ We must deflect the coercion of history and reign in the excesses of freedom, both of which represent grave threats to civil form: history, in its willful ignorance of equality's defeat of centrality, and the intemperance of freedom which mindlessly creates vulgarity, ego, and spectacle.

We recognize too that, in the end, movement is a practice of space, inextricable from the possibility of architecture. It is this fact which again tells us of the essential work of form in expressing the values and tenets of our society.

NOTES

- ¹ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, Chris Turner trans. (London: Verso, 1988), p. 81.
- ² Horatio Greenough, "American Architecture" in *Form and Function: Remarks on Art, Design, and Architecture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), p. 64.

- ³ These thoughts, and the subsequent issues of maintenance and reciprocity, are indebted to the work of Christopher Risher, Jr., and illuminated in his unpublished manuscript "The Problem With Natchez," p. 2.
- ⁴ Baudrillard, p. 75.
- ⁵ Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 23.
- ⁶ See Hildegard Binder Johnson, *Order upon the Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), Chap. 3.
- ⁷ Johnson, p. 39.
- ⁸ Andre Corboz, *Looking for a City in America: Down These Mean Streets a Man Must Go* (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1992), p. 51.
- ⁹ This paraphrases Foucault's observation of the Jesuits. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" in *Diacritics* Spring 1986, p. 27.
- ¹⁰ Benjamin Gianni, Bryan Shiles, and Kevin Kemner, *Dice Thrown* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989), p. 18.
- ¹¹ Corboz, p. 51.
- ¹² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, George Lawrence trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 507.
- ¹³ Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), p. 49.
- ¹⁴ Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990), p. 104.
- ¹⁵ This reevaluation of the determinism of rationality is perhaps the most useful work of deconstruction theory. Baudrillard goes as far to suggest that these concepts are already realized in America: "[E]verything we have dreamed in the radical name of anti-culture, the subversion of meaning, the destruction of reason and the end of representation, that whole anti-utopia which unleashed so many theoretical and political, aesthetic and social convulsions in Europe. . . has all been achieved here in America. . ." Baudrillard, p. 97.
- ¹⁶ This operation is now somewhat compromised. By bringing the contrast of the spiral on Fifth Avenue into submission, the Guggenheim's recent Gwathmey Siegel addition creates a composition by which the building can be occluded into the reasonability of the grid. See Carter Wiseman, "Guggenheim Go-Around" in *Architectural Record* October 1992, pp. 102-3.
- ¹⁷ Corboz, p. 43.
- ¹⁸ Rem Koolhaas has said that the effect of EuroDisney on Europeans is much like that of a large sculpture park, because "the myth of Main Street is as unrecognizable as the myths of all the characters in the Disney stories." Noted in a studio review at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, December 1992.
- ¹⁹ Risher, p. 2.