

Ground and Frame: On Windows and Driveways in the Contemporary City

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...I sought to relate individual structures to their urban site or their setting in the rural landscape: thus I turned my back upon the habit of treating the building as a self-sufficient entity, an esthetic abstraction; in doing this, I not merely did justice to social conditions but also gave due esthetic importance to the whole mass of building that necessarily serves as a background for the outstanding works of civic and religious architecture. The single building is but an element in a complex civic or landscape design. Except in the abstraction of drawing or photography no building exists in a void: it functions as part of a greater whole and can be seen and felt only through dynamic participation in that whole.

- Lewis Mumford in the Preface to the Second Edition of *Sticks and Stones*¹

DRIVEWAYS AND WINDOWS IN THE CONTEMPORARY CITY

The urban section of a metropolitan city reveals an architecture of human interaction, of public spectacle and private life in the vital middle ground. Where is the spectacle in the contemporary city, across the space of a driveway where the street life is reduced to walking the dog and an occasional jog? Is this condition a cause for despair or is it the liberation from the scrutiny of the public gaze? It is perhaps both, but



Fig. 1. Row house site: Aerial View

above all it is a condition which demands its own credible architecture.

These considerations provide a lens to examine the design intentions of four speculative row houses in an aging unzoned seam between a residential neighborhood of suburban density and an area of light industrial and commercial development in Houston, Texas. The project was executed by Albert Pope and William Sherman, Architects between 1988 and 1991. The site is constructed by the incorporation of previously separate properties into a larger tract for development. It occurs at the edges of several coherent urban precincts, in an area which is dissolving into formlessness, but whose lack of structure, either legislated through zoning codes and deed restrictions or built in urban form allows a degree of freedom. The site has a primary relationship to a gridded infrastructure of streets and services, implying the cellular dependence characteristic of post-enlightenment city. In no way is the existing context of sufficient density, consistency or compatibility with the new program to be a determinant of form (figure 1). The residential program is characteristic of the anonymous fabric of cities, whose relationship to the city will always be spatially mediated by the scale of the automobile. Building codes require that two parking spaces which do not block each other be provided for each residence. The real estate market demands two-car garages. The project is, in essence, the overlay of contem-

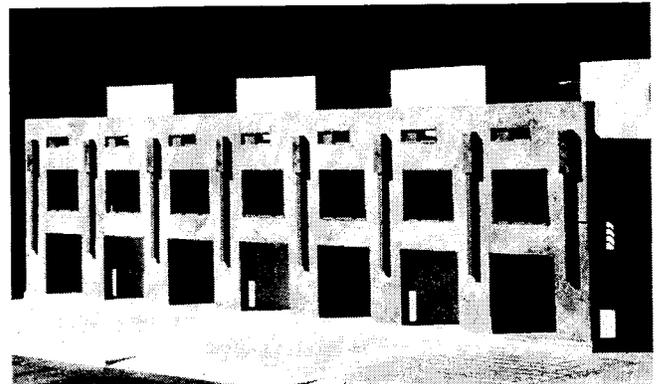


Fig. 2. Row houses: Model

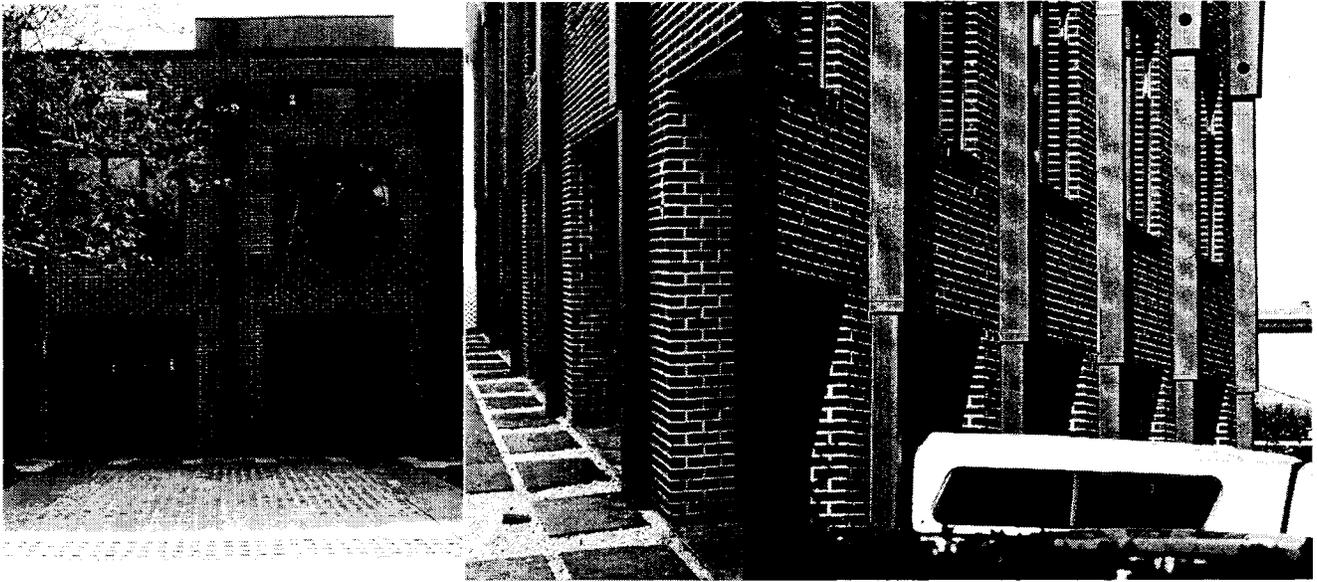


Fig. 3. Row houses: Joint between driveway and facade

porary suburban expectations on a more dense development of the city grid: fee-simple, zero-lot-line single family dwellings on 25' x 120' lots.

The result in similar unzoned conditions in Houston would be a series of houses struggling to assert their individual autonomy (usually by the memory of the individual house gable) while paving a twenty-five-foot zone between the building and the street. Front doors would be wedged into reveals between the garages. These conflicts between the symbols of individual autonomy and the incorporated lots, between the message of the facade and the meaning of the ground reveal an architecture caught somewhere between desperation and absurdity. The middle ground in this case is a product of the market, the architecture no more significant than a billboard.

The approach to the design of the Row House was to take advantage of the contradictions as a catalyst for reconsidering both the facade and ground plane, then to follow their implications into the work. Four houses lie behind a seven-bay arcaded facade (figure 2). The collective scale of the arcaded garages, the commercial-scaled windows, the absence of individual articulation and numerical misalignment of window and dwelling identify a structure of ambiguous function. Ambiguity would have been defeated by eight parallel driveways, the ground surfaces of the contemporary city being anything but ambiguous. Here four curb cuts stop at the edge of the city right-of-way, detached from four concrete and grass squares. The squares are separated from the building by concrete stepping stones set in gravel, spaced to accommodate the wheelbase of the car (figure 3). Their form in no way indicates their purpose; they may function as driveways but make no effort to indicate how. Where the ground rules of the contemporary city are clear and unambiguous — in property lines, utilities, traffic regulations, and the autonomous logic of the highway engineer — the challenge

for the architect is to construct an order where the rules are open to interpretation. The driveway here may be simultaneously a garden, a playground, a front walk and a parking area, with no one purpose explicitly predicted in its form.

Similarly, the arcaded form of the masonry facade resonates with a memory of a middle-ground urban form, but is self conscious of its removal from that urban condition by the space of the driveway. It could just as easily be referring to the multi-bay auto repair shops just around the corner. The facade is a wall which disconnects the interior from the exterior as much as it ties them together. The traditional cues of domestic representation — the front door, the vertically-oriented window, the front steps, the human scale -- are elided from the composition. The facade is measured by monumental downspouts. The windows have a deliberately uninformed relationship to the interior: off-center, a bit too high, an accidental stage rather than a box seat. As slightly horizontal rectangles with three equal vertical divisions, they defy the hierarchies and proportions of humanism, ignore the polemics of modernism to allude to the geometries of pragmatism. It is a wall that questions, but does not abandon, its urban aspirations.

Piercing this veil is a pedestrian space, a tentacle of the driveway space continuing the black concrete floor, which penetrates into an interior court before allowing entry into the dwelling. The perspectively warped passage opens to an interior loggia, constructing a space of private theater between the court, the front door and the Parisian window above (figure 4). The moment of human exchange is intensified in the private setting: this window, a door of invitation denied by a steel rail, is the quintessential architecture of desire. The court, twelve feet wide, forty feet long and thirty three feet high is not the figural space of a French Hotel, but a void created by the narrowed elongation of the dwelling unit. The twenty five foot wide lot is bisected by

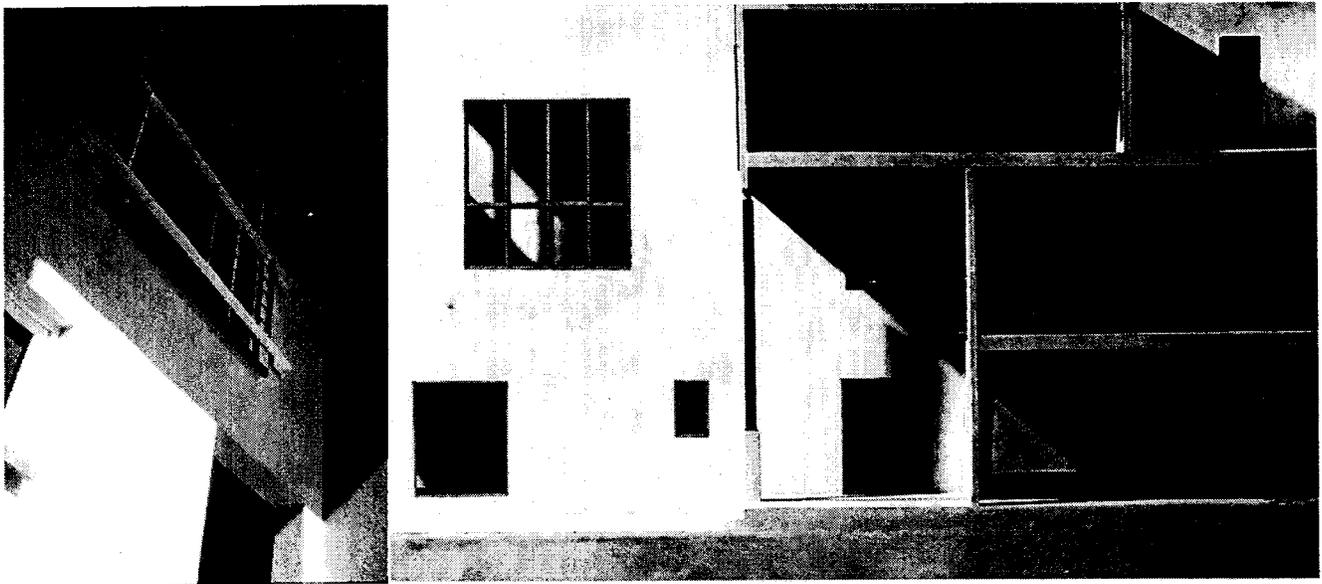


Fig. 4. Row house section and Inggia



Fig. 5. Row houses: Rear view and court

an interior, perforated party wall, and it is this wall that contains the entry. The box-like form of the dwellings is expressed by the individual hollow towers visible in the rear, with metal-clad rooms suspended between, reinforcing the sense of the court as void (figure 5). The similarity of the two opposing surfaces suggest an unenclosed interior urban space. The primary dwelling spaces are above, overlooking both the court and the driveway/street, culminating in a roof terrace with a view to the skyline of the city (figure 6). The interior of each of the four dwellings has been renovated by the inhabitant. The role of the architect is not to determine the aesthetics of domestic life, but to frame the individual's choices within a strong frame of light, space and compelling urban relationships.

On one level, this building belongs to long-standing

traditions of American urbanism: a party wall structure, fleshing out the grid and property divisions. But it is finite, neither a fragment of an intended continuity nor a self-contained object. At each moment where the urban conventions can be identified with specific cultural conditions -- as in the aspiration for an architecturally-constructed street life — the design has been tweaked by a self-consciousness of contemporary circumstances. The city is not viewed with dismay or pessimism, but is mined as a generator of an alternate form of urbanity.

THE GROUND AND THE FRAME

The middle ground of the contemporary city was partially predicted in the earliest cities of the New World, cities

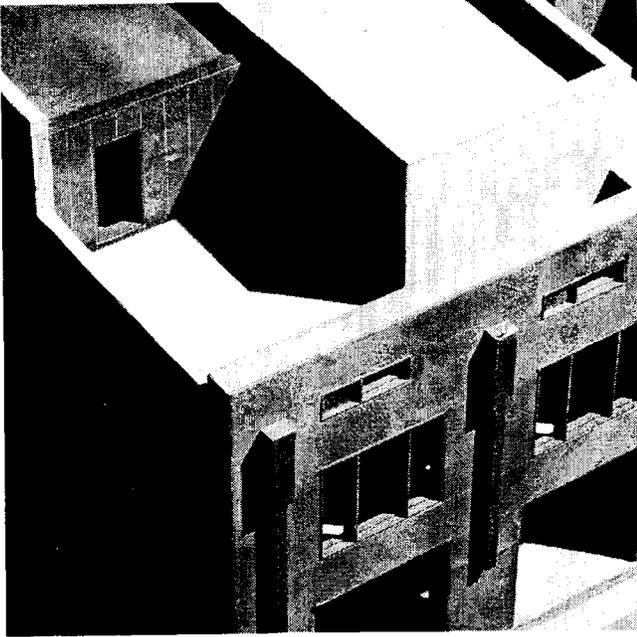


Fig. 6. Row house model

defined with geometric precision as an infrastructural frame rather than a historical record of human occupation. In 1748, two maps were drawn which describe a revolutionary re-thinking of the space of human settlement (figures 7 and 8). The Nolli plan of Rome and the Wadsworth plan of New Haven represent such radically different understandings of the role of architecture in the construction of the city that no credible architectural theory is complete without weighing the difference. The plan-generated figure/ground duality of the Nolli plan places architecture at the center. The city is represented as a product of human artifice, the city as

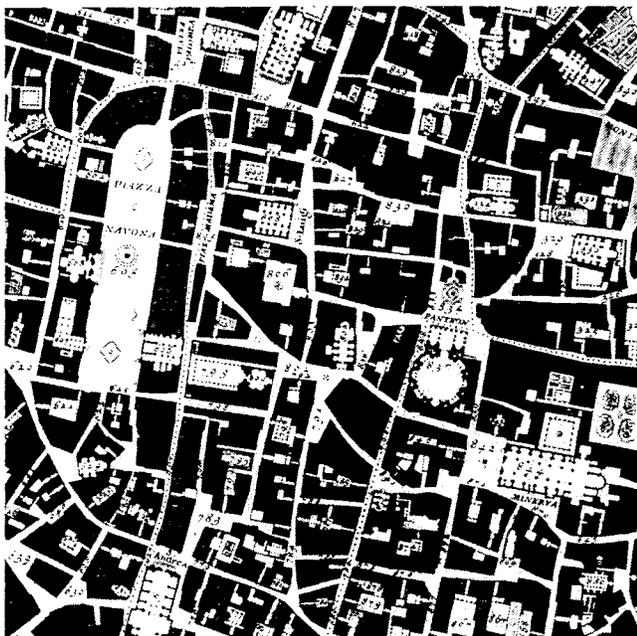


Fig. 7. The Nolli Plan of Rome (Partial), 1748

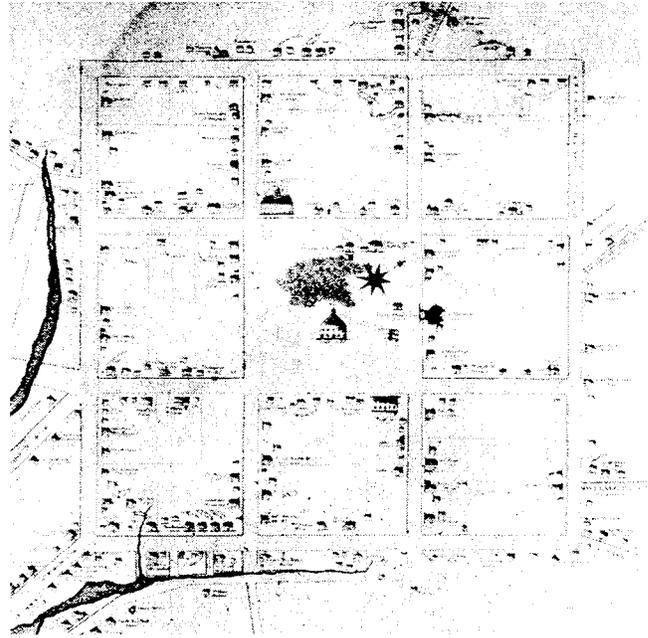


Fig. 8. The Wadsworth Plan of New Haven, Ct., 1748

architectural space unimaginable without reference to human dimension. The Wadsworth plan, like many contemporaneous plans of New World cities, represents the autonomy of geometry and property which would forever reorder the logic of human settlement. The Nolli plan describes a dense weave of architectural space and mass, the experience of which is molded to bear the inscribed meanings of Roman culture. In the Wadsworth plan, architecture is reduced to minuscule icons on a measured plane, the idea of the city being represented in the regulated boundaries of property and streets.

Neither map (no map) is complete. The Nolli plan proved to be a formidable tool in the attempt to reassert the urban responsibility of architecture in the past thirty years. It is however an ultimately nostalgic tool unless examined critically for the limits of its applicability. The urban infrastructural framework, central to the development of the post-enlightenment city, is unrepresented. This framework is predicted in the Wadsworth plan, as it is instrumentalized in the continental gridding of the United States. The idea of the city exists, independently of the architecture of the city, independently of natural preconditions. The architectural figure is displaced by the infrastructural frame. What is constructed is a non-oppositional duality of ground and frame, a duality with a void where the figure was, to be filled by the icons of contemporary culture.

This is the first sense of the ground/frame duality: that relationship between the earth and the infrastructure which sought to construct a more stable version of nature. A second duality is between the order which has been laid over the surface, the new ground of the city and the way in which the experience of this new ground is framed. Within this non-oppositional duality, the human figure reasserts itself, not as

an object of representation, but as a sensate, culturally-distinct being. It is between the new ground of the city and the architectural framing of its experience that a new middle ground may be constructed. It operates according to a different set of rules; its meaning does not lie in the representation of the human figure, nor is it imagined to be inherent in the architectural object. Meaning is transitory, constructed by experience, without claims to universality or collectivity. Architecture is a frame, rather than a figure, by which the contemporary ground may be understood. While a weak frame would simply reiterate the bland mediocrity of contemporary urban experience, a strong frame has the possibility of charging the contingencies of the city, even the apparently banal, with fresh understanding. Like a ripple in a liquid surface rather than a seamless unity or a static opposition, a strong re-framing of the city, no matter how local, can alter the perception of the whole.

The space of this ground/frame relationship is the characteristic space of the contemporary city, for which the rules have not yet been written. It is the corporate space, neither private nor public, corporeal nor incorporated, which is the increment of contemporary construction. It belongs neither to the street nor to the building, but it entirely re-frames the relationship between them. Call it the space of the driveway.

THE DRIVEWAY

The space of the perceived city is the space of the driveway. This is the zone of automobile space (parking lot, garage or drive) between the street and the building. The street itself, when defined as an artery and stripped of its pedestrian life, figural definition or function as a place of interaction, may become the driveway space of the city. The driveway is a visual space of human isolation and distanced observation. If the architect doesn't recognize how profoundly the properties of this space changes the rules of the discipline, any efforts to reconsider the role of architecture with respect to the city are in vain. Whether at the scale of a single dwelling or a massive "edge city" complex, the space of the driveway is the instrument of urban fragmentation, the destroyer of any notion of continuity of perception.

The first casualty of the driveway, though not often defined this way, is the possibility of black and white definitions of urban space: inside and outside, public and private. The historical urban middle ground, where the body finds echoes of its presence to articulate urban boundaries in the frame of a window or the proportions of a doorway, is scaled to the dimensions of the car. All communication at this scale is iconographic rather than figural; perception is unmediated by a consciousness of the body. Where the historical middle ground was a space of perception in which differences could be understood, contemporary urban space is a zone of signage. The distance constructed by the space displaces urban experience from the visceral to the visual, from interaction to observation, from the vitality of human contact to the abstraction of secondary relationships. But it

is also comforting (its great strength and motivation): an insulator, a space of security and control, where participation in the city is a matter of selection rather than circumstance.

This city may be understood as the post-figural city, the city whose function as a place of communication has been dislocated from its form. This is not a product of the discovery of cyberspace, but is inherent in the abstract order of the modern world view. The sociologist Robert Park described it in a 1916 essay on the city as the emergence of the secondary relations of the growing forms of media over direct human contact.² Le Corbusier understood the phenomenon of the distance; the *Ville Radieuse* (1933) is the architectural embodiment of the condition, a celebration of the disembodied eye. He constructs a new corporate ground under the sky of roof gardens and elevated streets, but leaves the original ground without compensation.¹ In *Learning from Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown describe the phenomenon as the architectural shift from the figure to the icon, where architecture assumes the function of the salesman as a medium of economic exchange.⁴ Their revelation of modern architecture's elision of the iconography of contemporary culture (modernism then only to be understood as a sign of itself) found significance in the sign as the substitute for the figure. We are left with a city of signs and systems, without apparent formal coherence. While the promoters of the modern city attempted to make an urban form out of the systems, and the postmodernists reveled in the linguistic possibilities of architecture's status as signage, neither offered a substantial promise for the future. After a century of oscillation between utopian sterility and linguistic gamesmanship, urban form ceased to matter.

What then is the role of architecture in this condition, if it is not to abandon the discipline of crafting form and constructing space? One possibility is to liberate architecture from the cultural responsibility of city-making and pursuing its own ends. Another is to attempt to resuscitate an imaginary past, re-conceiving contemporary culture to fit the imagined notion of architecture's centrality to the conception of the city. A third approach would be to explore the implications of the new ground/frame relationship, to make less ambitious claims for meaning, to address the current nature of the space between the building and the city. How does this intermediate urban space alter the conception of building form?

To a certain extent, the issue was defined most clearly by Adolf Loos in the assertion of architecture's challenge to frame the difference between public and private culture.⁵ Architecture has the potential to construct a distance between the cultural life of richly lived experience and the stifling conventions of civilization. Loos' sections and facades that set up this distance are not mute, but assert a profound generality, cross-fertilizing the anonymity of a business suit with the gravity of a tomb. Within the boundaries of the early twentieth century metropolitan city and the primacy of the facade, Loos describes the urgency of the strong frame to construct the space for a meaningful cultural

life. The challenge in the contemporary city is to understand a credible means by which such a strong frame could be imagined. In the post-figural city, the facade is not the mediating element. The entire the space of the driveway, constructed by both the ground and the wall, is the critical space of urban definition. Inseparable from the objects and spaces which construct it, it extends its tentacles of influence deep into the imagination of building form.

A CATALYTIC FRAME

This urbanity may be viewed with alarm by those who cling to nostalgic memories of some golden age of public life. But it must be remembered that those spaces were predicated on a narrowly defined public. The price of a truer democracy is a less instrumental space, both in terms of constructed spectacles and the erection of boundaries. The driveway space of the contemporary city, while currently synonymous with privatization, affords an opportunity for a more elastic space of non-programmed activity. It can only be achieved if the potential of the space is exploited for this purpose, rather than simply reinforcing a tendency toward more rigid boundaries of program and property. The rules are written on the ground; they need not be proscriptive. Through the window, each individual's city is realized, but not necessarily predicted.

A recurrent term in this paper is "non-oppositional duality." It alludes to a way of thinking which is an alternative to the Classical opposition of man and nature, to dialectical methods of discourse, to Saussure's postulation of difference as the underpinning of linguistic meaning. It celebrates architecture's imprecision as a language, and its potential precision as a setting for other conversations. To sustain these aspirations, architecture must suppress the voice of its iconography and instrumentality. Architecture, as the frame to a new urban ground, is a catalyst for future relationships.

NOTES

¹ Lewis Mumford, *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955), Preface

² Robert Park, "The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment" in Richard Sennett, ed., *Classic Essays in the Culture of Cities* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 110: "Modern methods of urban transportation and communication --the electric railway, the automobile, the telephone, and the radio -- have silently and rapidly changed in recent years the social and industrial organization of the modern city. They have been the means of concentrating traffic in the business districts, have changed the whole character of retail trade, multiplying the residence suburbs and making the department store possible. These changes in the industrial organization and the distribution of the population have been accompanied by corresponding changes in the habits, sentiments, and character of the urban population. "The general nature of these changes is indicated by the fact that the growth of cities has been accompanied by the

substitution of indirect, 'secondary', for direct, face-to-face, 'primary' relations in the association of individuals in the community."

³ Le Corbusier, *The Radiant City* (New York: The Orion Press, 1967), pp. 34-36 : "The most indispensable functions of modern life require the installation of countless utility mains... The framework with open plan means total freedom in placing mains. Pilotis make the "elevated street" feasible and thereby, the classification of traffic: pedestrians, cars and parking... As a result, the entire surface of the city will be available for traffic. Moreover, new ground will be created: the roof gardens. What fortunate circumstances, if we know how to take advantage of them."

⁴ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott and Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1977), pp. 9,13: "The cloverleaf and the airport communicate with moving crowds in cars or on foot for efficiency and safety. But words and symbols may be used in space for commercial persuasion. The Middle Eastern bazaar contains no signs; the Strip is virtually all signs. In the bazaar, communication works through proximity. Along its narrow aisles, buyers feel and smell the merchandise, and the merchant applies explicit oral persuasion. In the narrow streets of the medieval town, although signs occur, persuasion is mainly through the sight and smell of real cakes thorough the doors and windows of the bakery. On Main Street, shop-window displays for pedestrians along the sidewalks and exterior signs, perpendicular to the street for motorists, dominate the scene almost equally.

"On the commercial strip the supermarket windows contain no merchandise. There may be signs announcing the day's bargains, but they are to be read by pedestrians approaching from the parking lot. The building itself is set back from the highway and halfhidden, as is most of the urban environment, by parked cars. The vast parking lot is in front, not at the rear because it is a symbol as well as a convenience. The building is low because air conditioning demands low spaces, and merchandising techniques discourage second floors; its architecture is neutral because it can hardly be seen from the road. Both merchandise and architecture are disconnected from the road. The big sign leaps to connect the driver to the store, and down the road the cake mixes and detergents are advertised by their national manufacturers on enormous billboards inflected toward the highway. The graphic sign in space has become the architecture of the landscape. Inside the A&P has reverted to the bazaar except that graphic packaging has replaced the oral persuasion of the merchant. At another scale, the shopping center off the highway returns in its pedestrian malls to the medieval street."

⁵ Stanford Anderson, "Critical Conventionalism in Architecture", *Assemblage I* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1986), pp. 14-15: "Loos looked at the city around him and saw no need for artistic fantasies about the forms of the future. The system of the city railway, the blocks of flats with identical floors made possible by modern construction and the elevator -- such systems were already present... Loos invited his readers to look at how life had already changed in the modern city: the larger city, the greatly facilitated circulation through the city, the new social and spatial organization of the city, new urban activities..." The following statement demonstrates that the Loos-Kraus criticism was determined to save the requisite cultural space but not blindly to reinforce received culture: "The primary problem should be to express the three-dimensional character of architecture clearly, in such a way that the inhabitants of a building should be able to live the cultural life of their generation successfully' [Otto Graf]."