

Place: The Socio-Cultural Context of Making Spaces

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A hot topic within architectural discourse, placemaking dominates the writing of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Place, or the lack thereof, has been lamented by writers—such as James Kunstler, Peter Blake, Tony Hiss, and others—in response to the devastations wrought by the influence of the automobile, the commercial strip, and the post World War II suburb. The idea of place gets bantered about in a naturalized way; as if its definition were assumed and, much like the Supreme Court's stance on pornography, the authors know it when they see it; and, it's not in Edge City.

The New Urbanists provide one design response to the late twentieth century perceived loss of place. As a group, the New Urbanists demonstrate a myriad of approaches and concerns, but most are catalyzed by a renewed interest in historical types and forms, regional distinctions, and in some cases, environmental sustainability. The New Urbanist vision that dominates the discourse was that instigated by the husband-wife team, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk (DPZ) and symbolized in their design for Seaside, Florida. In their New Urbanist schema, a revitalized sense of place is made in villagescapes that promote small-town values. They achieve this reinvention of small town America via the application of type through the implementation of codes. In fact, Vincent Scully asserts that "the important place-maker is the code" in DPZ's designs.¹ Part of the New Urbanist rhetoric (more appealing and persuasive to the public than the endless charts of codes) is the application of local typological precedents to each project (and certainly the whites and pastel frame motifs of Windsor, Florida contrast to the staid Georgian brick of Kentlands, Maryland). Nevertheless, the movement asserts the myth of a nationally and culturally co-

herent urbanism; an urbanism which combines the ideals of the nineteenth century Main Street and the twentieth century Garden City; an urbanism which appeals to middle and upper class consumers seeking cultural stability and nostalgia in the face of an increasingly cacophonous and pluralized United States. As John Kaliski notes, "The so-called neotraditional town tugs at emotions and speaks to a mythologized memory of socially homogenous innocence, of golden ages conveniently distant."²



Figure 1. Mashpee Commons (Mashpee, Massachusetts) shopping center before a New Urbanist development. Photo courtesy of Cornish Associates, New England Futures.

Despite all their claims to urbanism, even supporter Scully notes that "the New Suburbanism might be a truer label."³ Frequently lambasted for their greenfields application of their principles—where there is no extant community, New Urbanists have recently begun to add abandoned downtowns and other brownfields sites to their foci of study. Nevertheless, despite claims to the contrary, their approach yields results that are still dismissive of that which falls

outside of an nostalgic American vision. In their application of a singular ideal to all existing conditions, their design approach is as problematic as the modernist *tabula rasa* approach to the city. While their designs are careful studies in the morphology of the public realm, they have chosen the historical typologies which suit their vision and then have their vision guide their designs. While they engage in public charrettes, these are venues used to educate the community on the principles of good design instead of opportunities to record local residents' understanding of their own history and values (particularly if they are in conflict with the expert view).



Figure 2. Mashpee Commons after New Urbanist development. Photo courtesy of Cornish Associates, New England Futures.

The New Urbanists employ a tautological approach—that architecture should be based on architecture. Perhaps, architecture should start with culture in order to achieve this notion of placemaking. This would allow for places that are based on the particular rather than on generalized typological formalism. If one is to be fair, the New Urbanists do invoke a cultural response as part of their mantra. But it is one that is homogeneous and applied from the top down.

BUILDING CULTURE

The idea of architecture borrowing from other disciplines in the pursuit of design practice is not new. Certainly a whole generation of postmodernists borrowed from the study of linguistics and semiotics to further their design agendas. Perhaps a look to anthropology is a way in which this notion of cultural specificity in placemaking can be achieved.

First, what needs to be discussed is the protean nature of the term culture. The distinction between Culture and culture becomes possible when the definition itself expands from something that is a standard of excellence to something that is a “whole way of life.”⁴ The first definition derives from an appreciation of “high” aesthetic form (opera, ballet, drama, literature, art, and architecture). Thus the initial conception of culture is one reified, bound in formalism, and held static in the site of the material object. The counter anthropological concept of culture sites itself in the social. For anthropologist Clifford Geertz, the concept of culture:

[...] is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be one of those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.⁵

While the former definition of culture remains a product tightly bound to an exclusive and elitist realm, one of excellence and therefore exclusion, the anthropological definition is more populist and all embracing, it is both the product and process of dynamic social interaction in all its forms.

An understanding of culture as a bottom up process (as opposed to a top down imposition)—one which makes the ordinary visible—begins in part in the early twentieth century with the work of anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. The corpus of his work and writing focused on his ethnological study of the people living on the Trobriand Islands, an archipelago to the north-east of Papua New Guinea. Malinowski took a radical stance against the ethnological orthodoxy of the time; he believed that anthropologists needed to immerse themselves in the daily life of the people they are studying.

As I went on my morning walk through the village, I could see intimate details of family life, of toilet, cooking, taking of meals; I could see the arrangements of the day's work, people starting on their errands, or groups of men and women busy at some manufacturing tasks. Quarrels, jokes, family scenes, events usually trivial, sometimes dramatic but always significant, formed the atmosphere of my daily life, as well as theirs.⁶

It is these contingencies of everyday life that Malinowski believed were only revealed when one pitched a tent in the village. And it is these contingencies that Malinowski believed would reveal not

only the ephemeral and quotidian practices of the people, but also an interpretation more “permanent and unconscious.”⁷ In other words, Malinowski’s radical methodology was to move from the particular to the general based not on the exceptional ritual or limited contact, but based on the banalities of everyday life. The result was an understanding of culture enriched by the dialogue between the qualitative and quotidian experience and the more stable and fixed cultural structures.

Geertz expanded Malinowski’s revolution of ethnographic practices with his assertion that “ethnography is thick description.”⁸ But what does Geertz mean by thick description? Thick description is set opposite to thin description. Thin description would be satisfied with the ontological status of an action (i.e. winking as a eyelid contraction) or with the mimesis of an action without understanding its fullest and subtlest meanings and nuances. If culture is not a power or a causation, but a context, then thick description is the means by which one gets at an understanding of that context. Thick description as a methodology is useful which searching for particulars, the peculiar, the potentially disjunctive, and meaning instead of only universals and generalized laws. It is, thus, useful when one investigates and conceives of not a culture but a plurality of cultures.

Traditionally anthropology (a.k.a. ethnology) has been the academic arena most attentive to everyday life; it is the empirical registering of ways of life. This recording of the quotidian is a means to the end of a thick description. Ethnographers are in the business of looking at culture as ‘texts,’ whether those texts are spoken, gestured, performed or written. Those texts can also be, or result in, built form. The design process which took place in the community of Bayview, Virginia provides an opportunity to reveal the potential an anthropological model might provide in achieving distinction in placemaking, particularly in contrast to the popularity and increasing pervasiveness of the New Urbanist methodology.

BAYVIEW, VIRGINIA

On a sun-kissed afternoon, Victoria Cummings fetches her 5-year-old daughter, Kadajah, from the Head Start bus stop up on the asphalt road. Together they walk home, ambling through mud and skirting huge rain-filled holes that scar the half-mile dirt road. They stroll past rickety outhouses, the

privy seats and floors encrusted with dried sewage that seeped up through the ground during spring’s heavy rains. [...] Once home, Kadajah exerts her tiny biceps by pumping a dishpan full of off-color rust-flavored water from the outdoor hand pump that her mother will use for her ‘bath.’ Cummings plans a trip to the store to buy bottled water for drinking and cooking with her food stamps. Her 12-year-old, Latoya, gets home about 3:30 p.m., and Cummings leaves shortly after that for her night-shift job cutting fat off plucked chickens. Cummings’ dream is simple: “Water—running water—inside the house,” she says.⁹

Abject poverty defined the daily lives of the residents of Bayview, Virginia at the close of the twentieth century. Isolated on a peninsula across the Chesapeake Bay on Virginia’s eastern shore, freed slaves settled this community during the Emancipation of the mid-nineteenth century. Many of its residents trace their family heritage as slaves back to the founding of the Commonwealth in the seventeenth century. Their living conditions in the late twentieth century belied 350 years of progress and change, as a little over 100 residents counted among Virginia’s most impoverished in one of its poorest counties, Northampton. With no community center or retail stores, dirt roads “paved” with crushed oyster and clam shells, the chapel in near ruins, the demise of the local economy dependent on fishing and potato farming, and no running water to service the one-room shacks, Bayview’s residents simply wanted to improve their quality of life. Their immediate goals: affordable housing and running water. The feasibility of attaining these aims seemed bleak, particularly when employing conventional wisdom and methods to such a problem. Then Governor James Gilmore echoed the sentiments of many who presumed such problems unsolvable and such communities destined to extinction. Gilmore “questioned whether enough local capital [would be] available to install running water and central heating in homes in Bayview and nearby hamlets, where there is little industry and unemployment rates are high.”¹⁰ Instead of waiting for a solution from the top or for the demise of their community and its replacement with an upscale vacation enclave, the residents sought to solve their own problems.

Bayview’s community activism got its jump start in 1994 when a group of black and white residents teamed up to defeat the location of large maximum security state prison in their community. The grassroots organization, Bayview Citizens for So-

cial Justice (BCSJ), rallied against the demolition of homes, despite the promise of nearly 500 jobs that the prison would create in this economically depressed area. “We were brought here to be slaves, and now they were going to demolish these little African American towns,” Alice Coles, head of BCSJ, said. “I opposed it.”¹¹

After successfully defeating the state’s prison plans during a three year battle, the newly formed BCSJ partnered with the Nature Conservancy (the Conservancy runs a 45,000-acre preserve along the peninsula’s shore) and applied for an \$20,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to create a plan for eradicating the near Third World living conditions in Bayview. The BCSJ saw their collaboration with the influential land conservation organization as a statement of political defiance—that the improving of the quality of life was really an issue of environmental urgency. The grant al-



Figure 3. Typical living conditions in Bayview, Virginia at the end of the twentieth century. Photo courtesy of Michael Williamson.

lowed the BCSJ to bring in an interdisciplinary coalition of experts, led by Maurice Cox and his firm RBGC, Architecture, Research and Urbanism. This team worked with the citizens of Bayview to provide more than just a band-aid on their housing and water dilemmas, but collectively produced a long-term plan to rebuild Bayview both physically and socially. The resurrection of Bayview—under the official nomenclature Bayview Rural Village Plan—would include retail stores, churches, a post office, privately owned homes, rental units, cottage industries, affordable housing, and three deep-water community wells to provide drinking water. Also included were forty new sanitary pits to deal with the immediate severe sewage problems until the new homes were built. The partnership with the Nature Conservancy was not ephemeral, but an ongoing relationship, in which the Conservancy provided the community with technical, fundraising and organizing assistance.

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL MODEL

“We want to preserve open space. We want to remember the fields our people worked. Here people are tied to the land. We want to teach our children their history and to protect the environment, the air, and the water,” says Alice Coles.¹²

What exactly was the design process at Bayview and how does it differ from the public charrettes heralded by New Urbanists such as DPZ? And, is it really anthropologically driven?



Figure 4. New housing under construction in Bayview in 2005. Photo by David Hamma.

For over a year, the “experts” met with Bayview residents in both formal design workshops *and* informal community events such as picnics, concerts, and fish fries. At Bayview an integration of storytelling, oral history, design workshops, community events, and other low-tech approaches helped the residents collaborate on their environmental and housing problems, not only with each other but with the professional team. In other words, the education process was not linear and from the top down, but cyclical and engaged both sides (residents and professionals) for their expertise. In addition, the process began with the residents themselves, not as a speculative development. While certainly the members of the Nature Conservancy or RBGC did not go and live in Bayview for a year ala Malinowski,



Figure 5. A public building under construction in Bayview in 2005. Photo by David Hama.

their equal partnership with the residents and their consistent and long term contact began to reveal the particulars of life in Bayview which illuminated what anthropologist Ruth Benedict called the “patterns of culture.” For instance, in recognizing the need to provide a physical form for the social life of the community, Cox did not merely import the European precedents of the *place* or *piazza*. Instead, he realized that public gathering happened organically around personal grooming activities such as hair cutting, styling and shaving. A beauty/barber shop became part of the local economic plan, as well as receiving specific design consideration in recognition of its crucial contributions to sustain public life.

Nevertheless, making conclusions from the observation of everyday life can be problematic at best, as is revealed in the seminal work of Jane Jacobs. Jacobs’ popular critique of the modernist destruction of the city, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), employs an anthropological approach. She begins by making observations of the daily life of the city—mainly her neighborhood of Greenwich Village—which are detailed to the point of tedium, in the tradition of Malinowski’s ethnographic research

But despite her anthropological approach, Jacob quickly associates specific forms with good urbanism and defines those forms as good. ...The absolutism of her observations...results in a non-inclusive theory of place-making that cannot encompass, observe, value, incorporate, or utilize a full urban spectrum.¹³

In other words, her culturally specific observations of a built environment leads to a pattern of culture that is reified into *the* Pattern of the built environment, as opposed to belonging to a specific taste culture, as Herbert Gans would put it, namely that of 1950s Greenwich Village. So even though her investigation of architecture is broader than that of the New Urbanist typological foundation, Jacobs falls into the same trap. Once the investigation reveals a result, it is taken as the primer to be applied to all situations; and, thus, can lead to cultural homogenization.

An advocacy of the study of the ordinary is certainly not new to architectural discourse. Its most prominent articulation was made by another husband and wife team, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown. Their work in the 1960s and 1970s through studios and exhibitions created a taxonomy of the everyday built environment. A prime example is the exhibition they designed in 1976 as part of the American Bicentennial, *Signs of Life, Symbols in the American City*. Exhibited in the Renwick Gallery for seven months, *Signs of Life* presented the ordinary landscapes of mid-twentieth century America—the traditional city street, the highway, the commercial strip, and the suburb.

An assemblage of particulars with minimal analysis, composed more of pictures than words. The approximately 7000 photographic images constituted a visual anthropology of American ‘settlement forms,’ documenting in detail the individual variations within common patterns.¹⁴

While Venturi, Scott Brown and Geertz all root their theories in the importance of the symbol, Geertz believes, "The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is. [...] The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is [...] that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said."¹⁵

Venturi and Scott Brown are more concerned that we notice and value the burlesqued wink, but do not want to get at what is being said. In reference to their work on the Las Vegas strip, they declare, "Las Vegas is analyzed here only as a phenomenon of architectural communication; its values are not questioned."¹⁶ Even though Venturi and Scott Brown advocate designing based on an understanding of the existing built environment and are not offering up a mythic ideal of what that environment should be, ultimately they offer up a thin description. And it is a description based more on the visual than the social side of semiotics.

CONCLUSION

In some ways the difference between a New Urbanist approach and the beginnings of an anthropological design approach could be what anthropologist and historian Michel de Certeau terms strategies and tactics. In design terms, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett deems it the difference between planning and the vernacular. Strategy results from the practices of the powerful, who compose and manage place, whereas the tactical comes from below and relies on seized opportunities and the adaptation to the particular. While the design process in Bayview ultimately resulted in a master plan, perhaps the difference is in whether one employs the elements of strategy from beginning to end, or whether one allows for the contingencies of tactics to influence and make particular a master plan. In other words, to design for the unplanned at moments within the plan.

The application of an anthropological model to architectural design asks the designer to suspend his or her own value and cultural systems so as not to risk their imposition on another socio-cultural group with their own mores, practices, and rituals. Landscape architect Walter Hood did this in his urban diary design studies of pocket parks in Oakland, California. Hood examined the everyday practices and performances of groups often

marginalized or rendered invisible in the urban realm: prostitutes, the homeless, children, etc. He did so without judgment as to their belonging in this place; he acknowledged that they were already there. Architect Bryan Bell also did so when his non-profit firm DesignCorp, interviewed Hispanic migrant workers in Pennsylvania as to what their conception of home was, as well as their notions of the public and private realms therein, before he designed their housing. In other words, anthropological models promote sustaining cultural systems, in addition to natural and physical ones.

When asserting cultural sustainability as an integral element of design process one must consider, as Hood, Bell, and Cox have done: What is the nature of the knowledge base that informs what we mean by sustainable? What are the assumed values in this knowledge base; and, how can we sharpen our attention to recognizing potential bias? Cultural sustainability calls for an awareness of the unintended consequences of expertise driven design decisions, of issues of equity in the process and product. But how do we push at those set of cultural assumptions to make sure the universal isn't being imposed on the local; and, how do we think beyond any specific paradigm or template for cultural sustainability in placemaking in order to embrace the particular and let the peculiar thrive? In the case of Bayview, Virginia, it is easy to question how viable it is to replicate the unique partnership where all partners—the Nature Conservancy, a politically active citizenry, and the designers—, while providing different contributions, were on equal footing. Nevertheless, making place depends not only on the actions of the designer at its inception, but also, and perhaps even more so, how that space is enacted by the people who live there.

The object of Geertz's study is human beings. Therefore, his definition of culture and employment of thick description and semiotics in method and analysis fit his object of study. As many variables are involved in his endeavor, he starts with the interpretation of what are the signifiers and the signified among the social actions of particular people at a particular time; thus the meaning can be localized and particularized. In architecture, the objects of study are things not people, and the boundaries are even more ambiguous. While these things can be 'read' as signifiers — what do they signify? To whom do they convey what meaning? How does the

meaning change with time, place, people, prevailing ideologies, and/or with the ones inscribing the meaning? Thick description becomes a valid method for the interpretation of these physical and static objects that are known as architecture when architecture is defined as dynamic entities impacted by social ritual. Geertz asserts, "Anthropologists don't study villages...they study in villages."¹⁷ His turn of phrase is both clever as well as true to his theory. Its application to architectural design remains a crucial element in understanding place as not a design product but a performed design process.

ENDNOTES

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