

The Urban Scene and the Concept of Place

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Summary

The man-made world is a world of intentionality and, as such, it is constantly subjected to our different interpretations. Literary descriptions of urban architecture illustrate this aspect and serve as an important source of information and inspiration. In this article, the city is described as a topological field, i.e., as a system of places - squares, recesses, street-corners etc. - that structure the urban scene and serve as a support for human interaction. A series of examples illustrates the view that the "threshold quality" of places comes close to the spatial core of urban culture.

Résumé

Le monde construit par l'homme est un monde d'intentionnalité; il est donc soumis à des interprétations très diverses. Les descriptions littéraires de l'architecture urbaine illustrent cet aspect et elles peuvent être une source importante d'information et d'inspiration. Dans cet article, la ville est décrite comme un champ topologique, c'est-à-dire comme un système de lieux - places publiques, squares, coins de rue, etc. - qui structurent la scène urbaine et servent de support à l'interaction entre les gens. Une série d'exemples illustre la notion selon laquelle la "qualité liminale" de tels espaces est proche de l'essence spatiale de la culture urbaine.

We are all acquainted with the descriptions of urban architecture and spaces written by authors like Balzac, Gogol, James Joyce, Carl Sandburg, Ed McBain and many others. Their descriptions may sometimes serve as a background stressing the intrigue or the actors involved; they sometimes symbolize the heroes' and heroines' inner processes.

Fine literature, or for that matter trivial novels, seem to be a very important source of knowledge about the ideas that people associate with the urban scene. We would thus like to introduce our reflexion on "the urban scene and the concept of place" with a quotation from the Italian author, Italo Calvino. The passage in his "Invisible Cities" which is called "Cities and Desire 3" reads as follows:

Despina can be reached in two ways: by ship or by camel. The city displays one face to the traveller arriving overland and a different one to him who arrives by sea.

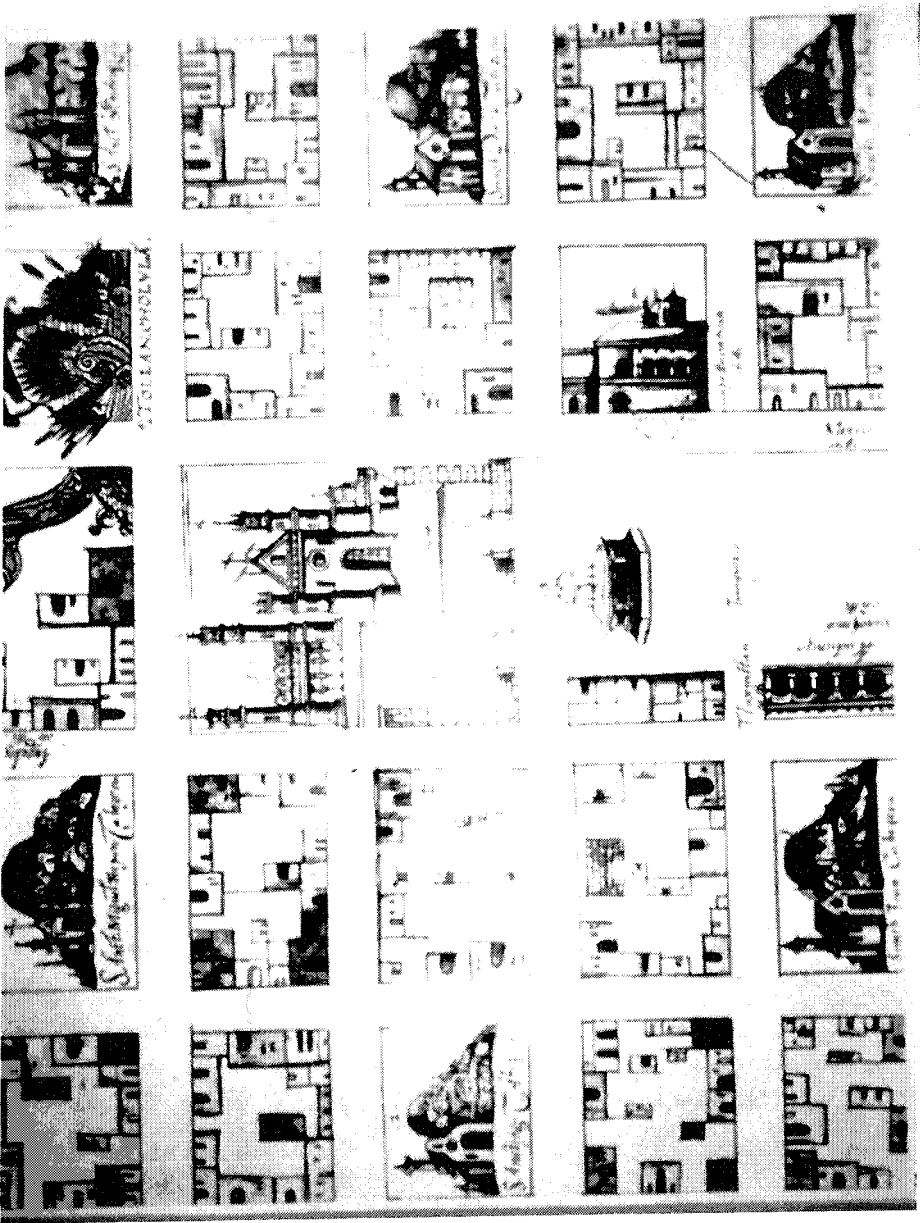


Fig. 1 The variety of city descriptions is infinite.
La variété de descriptions d'une ville est infinie.

When the camel driver sees, at the horizon of the tableland, the pinnacles of the skyscrapers come into view, the radar antennae, the white and red windsocks flapping, the chimneys belching smoke, he thinks of a ship; he knows it is a city, but he thinks of it as a vessel that will take him away from the desert, a windjammer about to cast off, with the breeze already swelling the sails, not yet unfurled, or a steamboat with its boiler vibrating in the iron keel; and he thinks of all the ports, the foreign merchandise the cranes unload on the docks, the taverns where crews of different flags break bottles over one another's heads, the lighted, ground-floor windows, each with a woman combing her hair.

In the coastline's haze, the sailor discerns the form of a camel's withers, an embroidered saddle with glittering fringe between two spotted humps, advancing and swaying; he knows it is a city, but he thinks of it as a camel from whose pack hang wineskins and bags of candied fruit, date wine, tobacco leaves, and already he sees himself at the head of a long caravan taking him away from the desert of the sea, towards oases of fresh water in the palm trees' jagged shade, towards palaces of thick, whitewashed walls, tiled courts where girls are dancing barefoot, moving their arms, half-hidden by their veils, and half-revealed.

Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes; and so the camel-driver and the sailor see Despina, a border city between two deserts.

This is only one of a great number of ways in which Marco Polo describes his home town, Venice, to the great Kublai Khan .

Many historical cities - like Rome or London, Paris, Stockholm or Prague - have been described, through the centuries, by different authors. And it is obvious that a given city can be experienced and portrayed in completely different ways, even within the same period of time.

It is also obvious that the very word and concept of "city" evokes many images and connotations in people's mind. This is in fact one of the basic ideas that can be drawn from the text quoted. The man-made world is a world of intentionality, and it is a constant subject of our very different interpretations.

Another idea or conception suggested by the above quotation is the metaphor of the threshold. A majority of important cities in history are such thresholds -- Venice is a good example, but also Alexandria, and London -, located as they are at river mouths or on the border between different languages, or different economies, cultures, or confessions.

To be such a border not only means to separate two geo-cultural areas from one another. It also implies joining, 'sewing' them together and thus, through that very thresholdness, creating confrontation, dialogue and fruitful inspiration in new ideas, in the arts and in science.

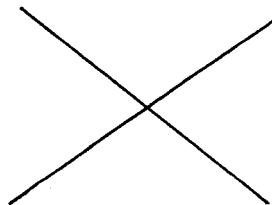


Fig. 2 Two lines crossing each other: perspective of a street and plan of intersection of two roads.
Deux lignes qui se croisent: perspective d'une rue et plan d'intersection de deux rues.

In that sense, the picture in fig. 2 could also be a good metaphor for the city. It is, as you can see, as simple as a picture can be, but it still has a double meaning. It can either be understood as a spatial representation, the perspective of a street running as far away as the horizon. The lower quadrant constitutes the street surface, the two on the left and right are the built facades, the upper one could be the sky.

But even if you do not read it in this way, but simply as two lines crossing each other, it still is a very good metaphor of the city. Now in the sense of two intersecting roads - which is the first of market places -, or as the point of reference in a system of information distribution, or simply as any node, where one way of transporting people or goods or ideas meet.

This is close to looking at the city as a magnet - a classical idea - which emphasizes the city's role as a focus or a centre from which we are sometimes kept at a distance, and which we therefore feel attracted to - and about which we make our images of hope or fear.

But it is not only ideologically so. The city is a magnet attracting goods produced in the surrounding rural areas, or sent from far away colonies. It is thus a focus of economic power and decision making. And since it is the location of big enterprise headquarters, a king's court, or the fortified palace of a dictator, it is also the scene of insurrection, of opposing this power, or even overthrowing it. In fact, what is not concentrated in the city? There is sin and crime and epidemics, and overcrowding, pollution and bad air. And loneliness, and the decay of values and beliefs.

Berman (1982), in his study of modern urbanism in literature and reality, takes his starting-point in Goethe's *Faust*, thus immediately selecting *faithlessness* as the essential condition of our own society.

Therefore the urban scene is the place where nothing is safe; where you can wake up in the morning and find that the generals have taken the power, or that the wonderful little café by the street corner, where you used to meet your friends for a chat and a beer has been shoveled away by a very big machine indeed. This has to be so, for the sake of development, no doubt.

How you feel about the word "renewal" certainly depends on your perspective. The city is a place full of opportunities. It is a place you enter to meet the unforeseen, to be confronted by the new. To be, so to say, intimately dipped down into a sea of anonymity.

The city stands out as a focus of change, and this not only for those who live in the countryside, where tradition prevails. Even for a citizen who is deeply rooted in the urban fabric, there will always be unknown things lurking in the wings. For the suburban youth, however, this is a very important and good thing. Perhaps rather suddenly he or she will discover that they have to leave the sandpit and the watching eyes of parents and neighbours, a surrounding where everything is too safe and too well-defined. The city will offer freedom from all that. It will offer opportunities to make acquaintance with other faces, and other threats; new scenes and games, with other rules to be learnt.

The conception, or model, of the city as a scene, with actors and settings for specific plays, has been used by Goffman (1963), among others. The idea may be criticized as it neglects the fact that a person's being-in-the-world is shaped by accumulated experience on the basis of personal intentionality. When focusing on a specific situation in the urban scene, and the roles involved, one may risk forgetting

the more long-term aspects of urban life, where the history of the individual is intertwined with the history of the city. Still: when describing the behaviour of people in public places - not explaining it - the scenery model may still be useful.

Part of the background here is formed by the urban sprawl, as a result of the basic fact that the modern city combines a very large population and spatial extension with a more or less planned segregation of functions in space: large dwelling areas are usually situated far away from large industrial working areas, which are in turn far from the centre of the city where big business, much of public services and cultural institutions are concentrated.

In addition to an immense investment in commuting and transport, this leads to a separation between different life situations - or scenes - in people's everyday life. This in turn implies that such different situations - within a single person, or within a family - never meet. The life-world is split instead of being integrated.

On the other hand, one could say: this is a positive thing, since it involves versatility, challenge emerging from different life styles, social flexibility. It is the paradise of the voyeur who has accessibility to anonymous space and place.

One might also say that the freedom of choice in behaviour is different in different places on the urban scene. Both in the overall spatial pattern, and in specific small places, there is a built-in creative will - as part of what Lefebvre (1968) calls *la production de l'espace*. We are used to talk - phenomenologically - about intentionality as something that is inherent in the human individual. But I think one could also talk about an intentionality in the given; in architecture, for instance, and in urban space. This intentionality integrates the material and political conditions of a certain time and expects - to put it mildly - urban people to fulfil this scheme in their everyday life and cultural behaviour.

We can easily read this, if we compare town plans from different historical periods, e.g., that of a typical medieval town, of the city of Richelieu in the 17th century, and a part of the Haussmann plan of Paris from the middle of the 19th century.

Along with the concept of "production of space", Henri Lefebvre introduces the idea of *appropriation de l'espace*, describing how people appropriate urban space, sometimes in harmony with, but often in spite of, the given, conquering physical spaces and scenes and making them into their own personal plots and plays, intentions and intentionalities. Numerous interesting research projects have been carried out, concerning these processes of appropriation; they describe how people's interaction with the urban space is related to the specificities of the physical setting, with the climate and the weather, the cultural context, and the competition between different groups during the day and at night. A very early description is found in Charles Dickens' "Sketches by Boz" (1836). Observations of a more systematic standard, have been reported by Korosec-Serfaty (1977), concerning Strassbourg in France and Malmö in Sweden, - and, of course, by many others.

These processes are not always harmonious. In the Spring of 1971 there was, in Stockholm, a dramatic clash between police forces and a mass of people occupying a small park in the centre of town. The event is known as "the Elms Battle". The authorities had presented a plan according to which the grand old beloved elms were to be cut down, due to the construction of a subpassage with shops and an entrance to the Underground. It could easily be shown that a number of alternative solutions would

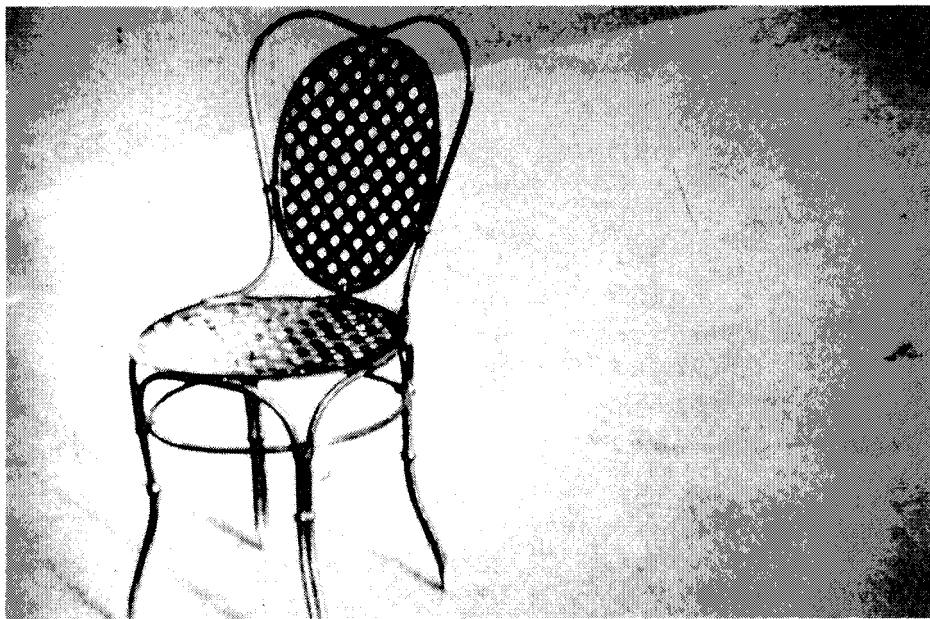
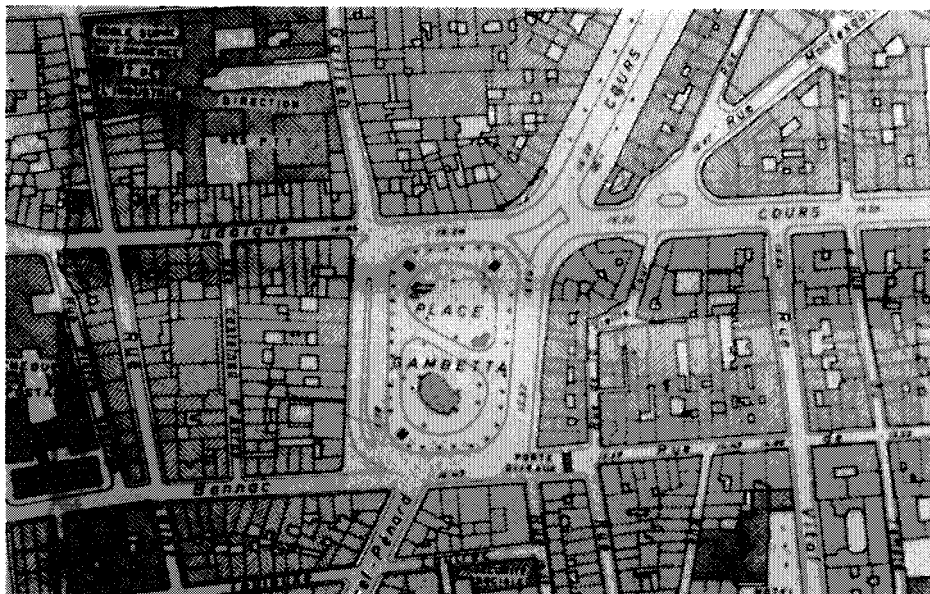


Fig. 3-4 Place Gambetta in Bordeaux. A small park with a pond, pedestrian paths and 100 light chairs to sit on and to move freely around.

Place Gambetta à Bordeaux. Un petit parc avec un bassin, des chemins piétonniers et une centaine de chaises légères pour s'asseoir ou déplacer.

save the elms but, for the municipal authorities, the whole case developed into a matter of prestige.

This is one of the very few examples where Swedish urban action groups were successful. A lot of people joined under - and up in! - the elms, coming from all parts of Stockholm, including the upper class districts and the suburbs, sitting-in day and night with a lot of eloquence and singing. At last the authorities had to declare that the elms would be saved. They are still going strong.

The interaction between what is urbanly given and people's activities shows how the physical setting frames and steers what can be acted out. The high aesthetic standard of street furniture that was seen during the second half of the last century will probably never be regained. Contemporary pedestrian spaces are usually furnished with a great vulgarity in design and a lack of flexibility in function.

Place Gambetta, in the city of Bordeaux, is a wonderful exception from that rule. It is something like 40 times 70 meters in size; and it consists of a small park with a little pond and a pattern of pedestrian paths. It also contains at least 100 light chairs that are constantly being moved, within the park area, so as to fit the changing wishes of the people who appropriate the place. You grab a chair and sit for yourself contemplating the verdure in the park, the human traffic or the daily news. Or you join with a friend or a group of friends for a talk or a play of cards. The regrouping of the scenery goes on all the time in accordance with the wishes of the actors. This shows how well it can be done, and with what simple tools, inviting people to social creativity.

Glean Chase, a sociologist at the Pratt Institute in New York, has proposed the concept of "unintended uses of architecture", which is quite interesting in relation to the appropriation of urban space. I think this notion is especially important for architects and planners, since it directs our attention to things we are not always quite aware of during the design process. - You can often see this in people's sitting behaviour on the urban scene. And you can see it in parks where people choose to walk along their own tracks, according to what is the most convenient or labour-saving solution. One might say that the clever planner waits for the first snow before he makes his decision and designs.

I would like to proceed now with a perhaps more systematic comment on the notion of "place". One thing I like about that word, is that it comes right out of everyday language, bringing fruitful ambiguity but with no scientific sophistication in it. The more you discuss it, the more it opens into new aspects, from physics to poetry.

The deficiencies in the quality of place on the urban scene of today is paralleled, at least in Sweden, by a lack of interest in and consciousness of these problems in the theoretical discussion among architectural researchers. As professionals, we are short of language here, when we want to describe this kind of phenomenons.

In the US, in England and in France, on the other hand, rather much attention seems to be paid to these matters, in terms of disorientation, lack of legibility, rootlessness and, more specifically, with concepts such as placelessness, topophilia etc. Since the 60s a critical discussion of these problems has taken place.

Canter (1984) suggests that instead of dealing with "environment and behaviour", we should deal with "action and place". He writes:

Action and place are both products of our experience of our transactions with the world. The notion of action is distinct from that of behaviour in

many ways, but one of the most important is that actions integrate conscious objectives. ... Walking may be an observed behaviour, but going for a walk is a different act from walking to school. ... (And further on:) Places are not only locations. They are categorizations of experience.

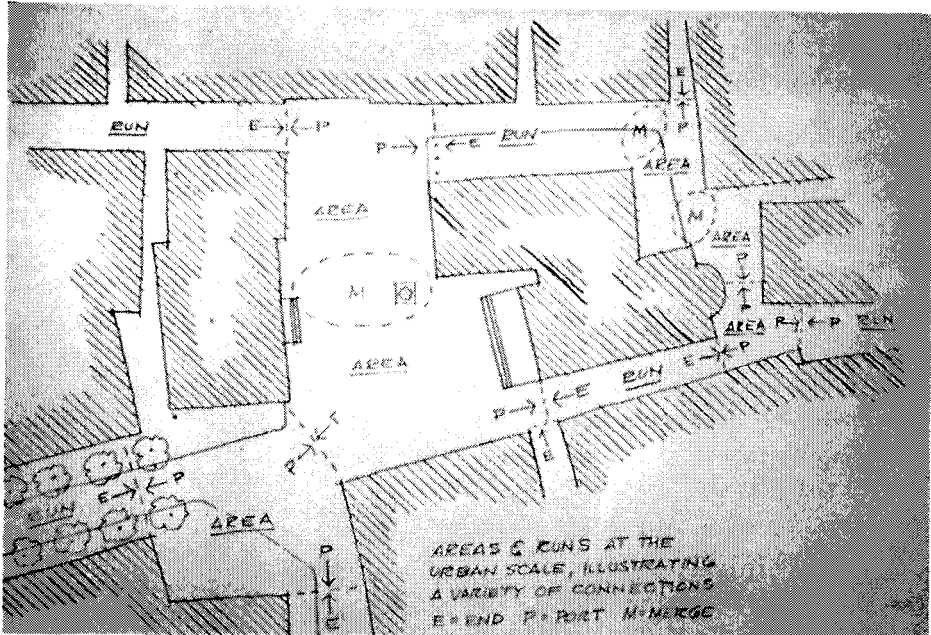


Fig. 5 Plan (from Philip Thiel, 1961) showing the variety of spatial conditions that can be read from a plan.

Plan (tiré de Ph. Thiel, 1961) illustrant la variété des conditions spatiales qui peuvent être lues dans un plan.

The concept of place should be given a rather open definition, I think, which would provide us with an opportunity to fill it with many meanings. It could refer to any "delimitedness" in space, that is, to any space open to direct experience and for which connotations in terms of function, aesthetic character, territoriality, or social implication, etc. can be named.

We usually think of a place as an evident physical thing, as a larger or smaller space, a square, a street-corner, or a recess in a wall in a medieval town. But in fact a place does not need to be that constructed at all. It could simply consist of the space occupied by a couple of friends who lie down on the grass for a chat during their lunch-break.

And a specific place, at the quay-side in the harbour of Helsinki, is a space for as long as the fisherman stays there with his little boat to sell his smoked herrings. People who are acquainted with the harbour know that he will be back, at a specific time. And they can refer to this point on the quay as the place where "Seppo Karjalainen turns up on Saturday morning".

These two examples underline the fact that a place can be a sometime's thing. But it can certainly also be a very stable and planned element in the urban scene, shaped with strong architectural finesse. We all know a multitude of such places through our own experience. And we probably agree that the most and the best of these examples originate from earlier periods of urban planning, when the design of the façades and the pavings, and of all those other elements that structure and hierarchize the setting, was much more elaborate and artistic than today.

If we connect the notion of place with action and experience, it is obvious that problems of urban topology should be understood in terms of situation. And, situations are made by a number of factors, such as their physical setting, the people present, the activity going on, the specific time (Pervin, 1977).

Therefore, any analysis of a specific *topological field*, i.e. of the quality of place, must first look at all the spatial conditions that can be read from the plan, like in this one example, by Thiel (1961) (Fig. 5), with its physical proportions, directions, openings, thresholds etc. And in addition to this a number of material aspects, in the articulation of walls and pavements, colours etc, plus sunlight and shades. The list could be much longer. - And in addition to this we must look at the functions of different elements in the place, activity patterns, and at what is going on in the buildings around the place: shops, a cinema, an empty storehouse or a café, the mouth of an underground station. The list could of course be much longer, especially if you inscribe the place in its overall urban context, and try to understand things such as traffic flows, accessibility and attraction of the place.

In fact, you have to go there, in order to see the lot of things that give a place its character, since this has to do with what people really are doing there. And what people are doing certainly depends on the weather, and on what time it is, night or day. A vast and dull place can suddenly, or regularly, be filled with a colorful drama, which could not take place anywhere else. A street-corner could be the place for a certain group of people, who appropriate the place during certain hours only, and where other people are welcome to be, in other hours.

The physical setting could be of an eminent architectural quality, as we can all easily remember, with examples of arcades and squares in cities like Monpazier and San Gimignano. But only the cultured tourist will find his way to such places. Architects should go there, in order to learn how to shape beautiful recesses on their home urban scene.

Other places are of no aesthetic sophistication at all. Still they attract their users, and they have a high topological value. I think of places, mostly in the suburban environment, where motorcycle clubs and other groups of youths come together and take over discarded houses and sites for their own needs. Also here the architect can learn something about the appropriation of space - and he can help defend such places against the local authorities when they want to clean the terrain.

In fact, the whole city is full of small places, seemingly insignificant and highly banal in design - recesses and thresholds where people love to loiter. Such points are very important elements in the analysis of urban topological quality. A threshold is a border between different spaces, and between rule-systems. It is also a place of confrontation and concentration.

Of course, it can sometimes be an exquisite place, like the "Galleria" in Milano, where people congregate like bees at the beehive entrance, waiting for the rain to stop.

Or just stopping there because everybody else is doing the same thing. That's why you often hear: "Do you have to stand right here, where everybody wants to go through?!" And, of course, I do, since this is the place where people run into each other, and stop for a chat.

Jane Jacobs (1969) points at the importance of thresholds, and at the visual presence there. For Jacobs, the densely populated and functionally versatile city core is a positive antithesis to the monotony of the suburbs. The basic element in her descriptions are the traditional dense city spaces and pavements which permit the growth of a semi-public belongingness, combined with security and freedom of choice in contacts.

A threshold could also be a more composite thing, with a number of steps from the completely private to the completely public. It thereby gives that freedom of choice in contacts, and of the degree of safety, or distance, from the mother or the big traffic flow. Alexander (1966) and Gehl (1987) are some of those who have emphasized the importance of such gradual transition zones in urban space.

This thresholdness, which is a key notion when we talk about places, and which I think is in the essence of urban culture, can of course present itself in many ways. Street furniture that allows you to go from walking into sitting down, or the other way around, could exemplify this. I remember a beautiful pattern of such interaction in a park in Tallinn in Estonia, where there is a square with benches along the sides plus pedestrian paths entering at the four corners, and crossing each other in the middle. Passing by, you may suddenly see a friend sitting by the side, so you sit down to have a chat with him. Or, he rises and you walk away together. This interchange, and coming and going, keeps on all the time. The whole thing is very banal perhaps, but it strikes me as being at the core of urban culture.

Maybe the highest form of appropriation is the one where people make their own places, conquering land from blind authorities or in opposition to planned deterioration. We are back here to the theme of "the unintended". Hester (1983) reports about three such examples of "labors of love in the public landscape". One of them is from the town of Manteo, in North Carolina, where a group of people labored through the years to turn a vacant lot into a park, "a green oasis amidst decaying buildings along the town's waterfront." Jule's Park was raised to a near religious plane through the use of symbolic rubble, memorial lamps, and the theme of building from ruins.

It is simply beautiful, non-professional and loaded with topological wisdom. Again something for architects and planners to learn from.

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